RUSSELL MONRO,
SOMERBY HALL,
OAKHAM.

JOSHUA HAGGARD'S DAUGHTER

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF

'LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET'

ETC. ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.



LONDON

JOHN MAXWELL AND CO.

4 SHOE LANE, FLEET STREET

1876

[*All rights reserved*]

v. 2

CONTENTS OF VOL. II.

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	'O, LET MY JOYS HAVE SOME ABIDING!'	1
II.	'WE ARE IN LOVE'S LAND TO-DAY'	38
III.	'SHE IS FAST MY WIFE'	76
IV.	'I LEAN UPON THEE, DEAR, WITHOUT ALARM'	101
V.	'TROP BELLE POUR MOI, VOILÀ MON TRÉPAS'	117
VI.	A FAMILY PICTURE	132
VII.	CYNTHIA TRIES TO BE USEFUL	154
VIII.	'E'EN AT TURNING O' THE TIDE'	166
IX.	THE SORROWS OF WERTHER	195
X.	'TWO SOULS MAY SLEEP AND WAKE UP ONE'	226
XI.	'AND ALL IS DROSS THAT IS NOT HELENA'	244
XII.	'IT WAS THY LOVE PROVED FALSE AND FRAIL'	260
XIII.	'THE DEEP OF NIGHT IS CREPT UPON OUR TALK'	283
XIV.	'A STORM WAS COMING, BUT THE WINDS WERE STILL'	297

JOSHUA HAGGARD'S DAUGHTER

CHAPTER I.

'O, LET MY JOYS HAVE SOME ABIDING!'

PLACID and happy, after its quiet fashion, was the Sabbath which followed. The scene of Joshua Haggard's life was so rarely shifted, that he may be pardoned by the hearth goddess for feeling a certain satisfaction in finding himself away from home. The novelty of Sunday at Penmoyle was pleasing. It was a relief not to receive exactly the same greetings he had received last Sunday; not to hear precisely the same speeches, accompanied by the same tones and looks and becks and nods, and even the same oratorical flourishes of a stout green-cotton umbrella or a neatly-polished oak sapling; and a relief perhaps to the eye not to see those particular coal-

scuttle bonnets or bottle-green spencers which adorned his own Bethel. The differences between Combhaven and Penmoyle were only differences of detail; but he felt that he was in a strange land, farther west, among people still more simple than his own flock, and people who loved him no less.

His sermon was a success. Sixpences and shillings rattled into the metal platters which the smug-faced deacons, in their glossy Sunday coats, held at the doors of the chapel. The temple was crowded to its utmost capacity, and handkerchiefs were used freely for fanning ruddy faces or for mopping perspiring foreheads, while peppermint lozenges and smelling-salts were interchanged among friends.

In a corner of the Miss Weblings' narrow deal pew sat Cynthia, in a straw gipsy-hat, her head thrown back a little as she looked up at the preacher. He saw those spiritual blue eyes gazing upward—saw and was moved by that unknown passion of joy or pain which had thrilled him last night. He tried to forget that intent face—tried to thrust every earthly influence out of his thoughts as he pleaded for his Creator's glory, for due honour to be paid to

the Lord of heaven and earth, as he urged with warmth the duty of sacrifice and unselfishness upon that open-mouthed bucolic flock—the duty of surrendering something of earth's enjoyments, some portion of their temporal blessings, to render homage to Him who gives them all.

'If we had a friend who was always showering gifts upon us,' he urged in his familiar way, 'should we begrudge him some small offering now and then in return? Should we take all and give nothing? Should we not be miserly and mean if we did? Should we not secretly despise our own meanness, even if we contrived to hide it from the eyes of men? And we have a Benefactor who is always giving. Our sleeping and our waking, our uprising and our downsitting, our health, our strength, our household joys, our homes, our fields, our gardens,—all are gifts from Him. Shall we offer nothing for all these things, not even a house in which to worship the universal Giver of good? My brethren, the pagans, whose gods were foolishness, made their temples so beautiful, that the beauty of the tabernacle has preserved the memory of the god. Yes,

for two thousand years these childish fables have lived in the memory of men, because those who believed them spared neither gold nor silver to testify to their belief. The gods of the Greeks were as real to the Greeks as your God is to you, and the splendour of their temples has remained to posterity as a testimony to the reality of their faith. These were foolish heathens, the children of darkness. Shall we, the children of light, leave nothing behind us upon earth to show our descendants that we too were in earnest—that the God of Truth has had as faithful followers as the god of lies?'

Verse by verse he read them—commenting as he went along—the description of Solomon's temple, his picturesque mind revelling in the gorgeousness of the record. He was asking for funds for a chapel, which might be built for three or four hundred pounds; and as he enlarged in glowing language on the glories of that Jewish shrine—the carven cherubim and palm-trees and flowers overlaid with gold, the door-posts of olive-tree and the doors of fir, the floor overlaid with gold within and without, the pillars of brass and the chapiters of molten brass,

the nets of checker-work and wreaths of chain-work, the lily-work and pomegranates, and that mighty sea of molten brass standing upon twelve sculptured oxen—his hearers thought within themselves that it behoved Penmoyle to do something; not to be behind the Jews of old, people with hook-noses, and perhaps old-clothes bags and a plurality of hats, whom folks looked down upon nowadays. And Solomon, who at his best was only a Jew, had been able to build this sublime temple, nay, if tradition were to be credited, sent as far as Penzance for tin and copper ore wherewith to accomplish this great work. This moved them much more than any idea about the Greeks, whom they depictured to themselves vaguely and variously, according to their several imaginations.

To Cynthia this sermon, which might have seemed trite and commonplace to that mordant modern intellect which, like the Athenian mind, spends itself wholly in going after every new orator, from Monsignor Capel to Moody and Sankey,—to Cynthia this sermon was full of colour and meaning. Of romance she knew nothing; poetry was a dark language to her, save the mute poetry of stars or flowers, earth's

loveliness or heaven's sublimity. She had never heard fine music or seen a stage-play, except the rude representations of showmen at a fair; eloquence, pictures painted in words, were new to her, and she listened spellbound. She could have given you no definition of greatness, yet in her mind she was assured that Joshua was a great man. She thought of St. Paul holding a vast and adverse throng by the magic of his discourse, and it seemed to her no blasphemy to compare Joshua with that saint and apostle. Her youth, her ardour, had nothing on which to fasten except this ideal of a good and perfect man. She was grateful to her mistresses for their small kindnesses and indulgences; but she vaguely felt the element of ridiculousness in the little fidgety ways and petty particularities of these elderly damsels, and the flowers of her fancy did not entwine themselves around the images of Miss Deborah and Miss Priscilla. The garden of her young mind was a fertile soil, however, and the flowers that sprung there must have something about which to cling and blossom, so they wreathed their ductile tendrils round that sturdy oak Joshua.

The afternoon was occupied by a second service, in which the mild exhortations of Mr. Martin had a somewhat sleepy sound to those who had dined heavily. Spirits weighed down by roast meat and potatoes, and a regretful conviction that the Sunday joint had been a thought too greasy, joined languidly in prayers and hymns; and there was a sense of relief when the lengthy service came to a close, and the congregation poured out of the oven-like chapel into the sweet fresh air.

Several friends dropped in upon the Miss Weblings after service: some who had known Joshua of old, others who were eager to be presented to him. Mrs. Gibbs, the butcher's wife, in her green watered silk, and with a gold watch—one of the few gold watches known to be extant in Penmoyle—reposing on her portly side, almost the grandest lady in the village. Miss Toothy, from the general shop, who was somewhat eccentric in her attire, but reported wealthy. Mr. and Mrs. Pamble, tenant-farmers of some importance, occupying a square stone house on the outskirts of Penmoyle—large people both, and given to pomposity, as conscious that they had never

been a day behind with the half-year's rent, and could afford to trust in Providence when times were bad, having laid by a small fortune before the Peace.

These filled Miss Webling's parlour to overflowing, and taxed the resources of the household in the way of teapots. If Cynthia had been less handy, things could not have gone off so genteelly; and the sisters might have been lowered in the esteem of Mrs. Pamble, who really condescended somewhat in visiting them, by sloppy tea; but Cynthia contrived to have a fresh brew in the every-day crockery teapot ready to replenish that silver vessel which adorned the tray. She brought in the rock-cakes hot, and nestling in a clean napkin, and she was never behindhand with bread-and-butter of the genteelest thinness.

'That's a handy girl of yours, Miss Webling,' said Mrs. Pamble approvingly, when the chapel and the day's sermons and the possibilities of the building-fund had been amply discussed.

'And an uncommon good-looking one too,' added the farmer, in his beefy voice. 'You won't have her long, miss, I fancy; some of the young chaps will be

wanting her to get married. These here pretty ones go off the hooks so soon.'

The spinsters bridled, taking this as in somewise a personal affront. They had been accounted personable in their time, they could have informed Mr. Pamble, though they had not gone off the hooks.

'If she's as sensible as I give her credit for being, she'll be in no hurry to get married,' replied Deborah, bridling. 'Single life is not without its advantages.'

Miss Webling knew that Mrs. Pamble was one of those disagreeable women who are as proud of having secured a husband and added largely to the population as if those achievements were novel and remarkable facts in the history of womankind.

'Ah, but they're all glad to get a husband; even the sensiblest of them,' chuckled the farmer. 'They're all ready to say snip to the first as says snap. It's a feminine failing.'

At which vulgar speech Mrs. Pamble and Mrs. Gibbs laughed until their silk gowns, or the rigorous corsets under the gowns, creaked ominously.

Miss Toothy looked daggers. She had never

said snip to any one's snap, and she felt that the conversation was becoming odiously personal.

'Of course I'm not eluding to ladies like you,' said the farmer, perchance perceiving that he was on dangerous ground, and accenting his speech by a slap on Priscilla's spare shoulder. 'You've had your offers and throwed over your sweethearts—you and Miss Deborah and Miss Toothy yonder; but servant-gals and suchlike ain't so partickler. A husband's a husband to their mind, so long as he's got a hat, and ain't blind or deaf. They wouldn't object to his being dumb, I daresay, for the sake of havin' all the talkin'.'

This being an old-established joke, everybody except Joshua laughed heartily.

'She's got very uncommon-coloured hair, that gal of yours, Miss Webling,' said Mrs. Pamble. 'I don't know as I call it pretty for a young woman, though it's very winning in a baby. My Jimmy has hair just that colour; and when he's naughty it goes more against me to slap him than it does the dark-haired ones—he's got such an innercent look with him. But I think flaxen hair's rather too simple-

like for a young woman; it gives her a foolish look.'

'What matter looks if she is not foolish?' said Joshua almost sternly. 'If you can bring up your daughters to be as sensible and as pious as that servant-girl, you will be a happy woman, Mrs. Pamble; and if God makes them as lovely, pray to Him to give them hearts as pure and minds as innocent as hers.'

From any one else such freedom of speech would have offended the farmer's wife; but she had come to see Joshua as a great preacher, and one must expect hard sayings from prophets and privileged persons of that kind. She only sniffed dubiously, and looked at her watch, which, a homely silver one, compared disadvantageously with that shining golden timekeeper pendent from Mrs. Gibbs's waistband.

'I'm afraid we must be going,' said Mrs. Pamble, as if loth to pronounce a sentence which must naturally afflict the company. 'There's the dairy never gets properly looked after unless I'm standing behind that girl of mine.'

'Ah,' grunted Mr. Pamble, 'you women can do nothing without a lot o' cackle. Missusses and maids is pretty much alike. There's so much scolding goes on in the dairy I wonder it don't turn the milk; no need for rennet, I should think, where there's women's tongues.'

'It isn't the women that sit arguing about nothing for three hours at a stretch in a public-house,' observed Mrs. Pamble, as she drew her white Paisley shawl across her robust shoulders, and skewered it on her breast with a large mosaic brooch representing St. Peter's at Rome; and after this home-thrust, she rose to depart, the farmer meekly following.

These magnates of the land being gone, after leave-takings at once friendly and ceremonious, Miss Toothy discovered that she was wanted at home, having promised her girl an evening out; and Mrs. Gibbs pronounced herself pledged to her domestic in the like manner. So there was a clearance of the smart little parlour, and the Miss Weblings folded their hands and leaned back in their chairs, feeling as exhausted after this unwonted assembly as a lady

of fashion when her reception of three or four hundred of the upper ten thousand is over, and life's green curtain falls on the social comedy.

'I hope I was polite to them all, Priscilla,' said Deborah somewhat anxiously; 'but I felt a little confused in my head by their all dropping in together. I'm afraid Miss Toothy might feel herself passed over. She's rather hard to draw out; and the Pambles are so lively.'

'Miss Toothy hasn't seen much company,' replied Priscilla excusingly. 'You can't expect her to be very conversable. But she's a great reader, and knows more about politics and the Royal Family than anybody in Penmoyle. She has friends in London that send her a newspaper every week; and she's got some nice books too, Mr. Haggard; she lent me the *Romance of the Forest* last winter, and I read it aloud to Debbie in the long evenings. I don't see any harm in a good novel once in a way, if you take your time over it, and don't loll by the fireside half the day, poking your nose into a book and letting your house go to rack and ruin.'

'I have forbidden my daughter to read novels,'

replied Joshua, finding himself thus directly appealed to, 'lest the unrealities she would find in them should give her a false picture of life, and encourage her to form baseless hopes or foolish desires. But when she is married and the mother of a family she may seek amusement for an evening hour in some innocent fiction, and be none the worse for it. And, of course, at your discreet age, Miss Priscilla, an appeal to the imagination can do no harm.'

'There never was a more particular man than my father,' said Deborah. 'He couldn't abide the sight of a book, when once his children had learned to read, except the Bible on Sundays and Dr. Watts's Hymns. He said books about a place were just an encouragement to idleness, and that as long as women had the use of their hands they ought never to waste time in reading. Yet, you see, Priscilla and I wouldn't be as independent as we are if Providence hadn't given us a taste for learning.'

Joshua bowed assent. He had been somewhat wearied by the tea-drinking, the fulsome compliments which Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Pamble had paid him,

the stuffy parlour smelling of toast and bread-and-butter. He was yearning for a breath of fresh air.

'I think I'll take a turn in that neat little garden of yours,' he said, as if asking permission of the sisters, who both had a drowsy look, and regarded him blinkingly, like owls in a zoological collection.

'Do, dear Mr. Haggard; and try and get an appetite for your supper. You made a very poor dinner.'

It was a minor duty of hospitality with the Miss Weblings to pretend to think that their guests had fared badly, just as it was the major duty to press the viands upon a visitor's consideration until he was so obliging as to over-eat himself.

There was no way of reaching the garden save through the kitchen, so to the kitchen Joshua went. The door at the end of the narrow little passage stood open, and the westward-fronting casement was shining like a jewel at the end of the vista. The kitchen was newly swept and garnished; no sign of unwashed tea-things or broken victuals; the polished grate winking and twinkling in the red light from a neat little fire; the red-brick floor spotless as

if it were a floor in a picture; every pot and pan arranged with the grace that belongs to perfect order; a dark-brown jug of roses and seringa on the window-sill; but the figure Joshua had expected to see by the casement was not there. Cynthia had gone for a walk, he thought; had gone to meet and mingle with those other handmaidens whose privilege it was to enjoy a Sabbath-evening ramble; perhaps to keep company—odious phrase—with some rural swain. The idea was repulsive to him. It seemed to him that there was pollution in such contact.

He went through the tiny scullery and out into the garden, which he had surveyed from the window that midsummer evening just a year ago when he bade Cynthia good-bye. There was not much to admire in the garden, perhaps, save for those eyes which are in the habit of looking at all rustic things as pictures, and which can see a study in brown in an old well and an empty bucket, or a nocturne in purple and gold in a cottage thatch steeped in moonlight. To Joshua, whose only experience of landscape-painting had been derived from tea-trays, that sloping bit of garden seemed commonplace enough;

even for politeness' sake he would not have gone so far as to say that he thought it pretty, and yet it charmed him somehow; there was a beauty in this vulgar rusticity which he felt, although he could not recognise or understand it. The picture of grassplot and flower-bed and crooked old apple-trees spreading their gray branches against the yellow sky; the sweet-pea hedge, the stocks, the sweet-williams, the blush-roses, the thymy potherbs; the little thatched shed for the pig yonder in an angle of the hawthorn hedge; the steep bank where the strawberries grew,—the homely charm of this picture crept into his heart unawares. He walked slowly across the little grass-plot, where a self-sufficing bantam was pecking at imaginary worms in dignified solitude; he ascended the narrow path, which had been cut into steps where the slope was steepest; and on the higher ground by the hedge discovered Cynthia standing by the pigsty, and actually exchanging endearments with the pig, whose black head lolled across the edge of his sty, and who expressed the gratification he derived from having his ears pulled in a series of confidential grunts.

'I thought you had gone for a walk, Cynthia,' said Mr. Haggard.

'No, sir. I go across the fields sometimes, and as far as the copse'—pointing to a dark waving line against the sunset—'and gather a bunch of wild flowers, when the ladies give me leave.'

'You go with your friends, I suppose; some of the young women in service here?'

'No, sir. I have no friends except my mistresses.'

'And no sweetheart, Cynthia?'

'No,' she answered, with a curious little smile.

What a relief it was to find that her girlish fancy had not idealised some boor!

'Ah, the time will come when you will begin to think of a sweetheart, I daresay; but I'm glad it hasn't come yet. I am going for a stroll across the fields, as far as that wood, perhaps. Will you come with me, and show me where your wild flowers grow?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And are you quite happy here, Cynthia?' asked Joshua, when they had walked a little way. There

were sheep in the meadow, and the sheep-bell was ringing with a pleasant sound in the twilight.

'Yes, sir; quite happy; most of all when you come here.'

'That is not often, Cynthia,' he answered, his dark eyes softening to tenderness as they looked at her. Why did she say these things in her thoughtless innocence, and why should words so simple, a mere childish expression of grateful affection, set his heart beating?

'No,' answered Cynthia; 'it isn't often you come, sir. But it is something to think of, and something to remember.'

'I cannot tell you what pleasure your progress has given me,' said Joshua gravely, but with a tenderness in his voice that was quite involuntary. 'I have thought of you often in the year that has gone, and have supplicated for you in my prayers every day of my life. But I never hoped to reap so rich a harvest. I never thought God would reward me so bounteously—to find your intelligence so bright, your heart so pious, your conduct so exemplary. It is very sweet to me; sweeter than words can say.'

There was a mist before his eyes as he looked away to the broken line of wood yonder, not trusting himself to look at his protégée.

'Could I do less than strive to learn what you wished me to learn, sir?' asked Cynthia. 'Can I ever forget what you have done for me? I was a heathen, as bad as those poor creatures the missionary told us about last winter. I was left outside in the darkness. I must have gone to the habitation of the lost but for you. I pray for you night and day; but my prayers are so little, they can never repay you. I wish I could be your servant, that I might work my fingers to the bone to prove my gratitude. I pray for you, I think of you, I dream of you sometimes; and I see your face all shining, with a glory upon it, like Stephen's when the wicked Jews stoned him.'

'Foolish dreams, my dear. I am neither saint nor hero; only a common man, with all our common infirmities; prone to sin when tempted, and chiefly blest in having led a life exempt from temptation to do wrong. Providence has been very good to me, Cynthia; my lines have been cast in pleasant places.

I have never known hardships or ill-usage as you have, poor fragile child. No dark shadow has ever fallen across my path.'

'It would be hard if you had sorrows to bear, sir; you who are so good,' said Cynthia. 'Miss Priscilla has told me about you: how you used to preach to the rough miners—men almost as wild as savages—and how their hearts were melted; how you used to walk many miles and suffer hardships, for the sake of doing good and teaching God's word, though you had a comfortable home, where you might have stayed if you had chosen. She told me that you offended your father by field-preaching, and that you were likely to have lost all the money he had to leave you, yet you never gave way. Was not that being a hero?'

'No, my dear; it was only being steadfast. The man who is without steadfastness will neither do good to others nor to himself. I saw that there were waste lands to be made ready for harvest, and I put my hand to the plough. God gave me health and strength, and love of the work. It would have gone much harder with me to stay at home behind

my father's counter than to bear the worst hardships that ever befell me in my wanderings.'

'Yes, I can understand that,' said the girl, looking up at him full of enthusiasm; 'that is because you are good and great. It was sweeter to you to help others than to be happy yourself. Every soul snatched from darkness and death was a rich harvest. Some of those you have saved are in heaven now. How sweet it must be for you to think that they are pleading for you at the throne of God!'

'My dear child, you let your affection carry you too far. I have but done a humble share of a great work; I only tread in the footsteps of greater men who have gone before. I am but one of many.'

'The Bible does not say that,' replied Cynthia. '"The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few."'

'That was in the beginning, Cynthia, when God's light was but dawning on the darkness of this world. The prayer has been heard, and the labourers now are many. Let us pray that they may labour aright. You have a lively and ardent mind,

my dear; God grant it may never be led astray. For a nature so fervent, so ready to admire and believe, an evil world is full of snares and springes; but so long as you are content to remain at Penmoyle with our kind friends, I feel assured you will be safe and happy. The life is somewhat monotonous, I daresay, but I hope you will not grow weary of it.'

'I shall have your coming to look forward to,' said Cynthia.

'And perhaps in time, if you advance steadily with your education, the Miss Weblings will let you teach in the school; and by and by, as they get into years, they may give you the entire management of their pupils; and you will be doing a holy and useful work, and occupying an important place in your little world. So you see, Cynthia, you have something better than domestic service to look forward to, if you go on improving yourself.'

'I shall try to do that, to please you,' replied Cynthia. 'I never forget anything you say to me. I think I could tell you every word you have said, from the time you first spoke to me on the common.'

Joshua was silent. There are some emotions whose ineffable sweetness is akin to pain—there are thrilling moments in which the soul burns with a rapture that is almost agony. How was he to construe these innocent expressions of regard, these little gushes of grateful feeling? Could they, did they, mean something warmer than regard, something deeper than gratitude?

They had crossed a couple of meadows and come to the edge of the copse by this time. It was only a narrow strip of wood, pine-trees for the most part, dividing one farm from another—a ragged edge of wilderness upon the skirts of cultivation and fertility; but to Joshua, that Sabbath evening, it was solemn as that darksome dell Dante walked in—a forest full of mystery and awe. He could scarcely see his companion's face under the pine-trees. It was shadowy as the face of a spirit.

'It is too late to find any flowers,' said Cynthia; 'but this was a lovely place in the spring. There were violets and wild crocuses, and bluebells and wind flowers. There are rabbits too; look—do you see them flashing past that dark-red trunk yonder?'

Joshua was too preoccupied in spirit to look at rabbits. He walked with his head bent, his hands clasping his stout oak stick, his lips tightly drawn, as if he were trying to solve some problem. One might suppose that he had forgotten the existence of his companion.

He was putting curious questions to himself: 'If I were so foolish—if I, who have thought myself so strong, should be weak enough to lay down my life at this girl's feet, to set all my hopes on her, to give her the remnant of my days—would there be any going backward in such an act? Is it sinful to love her for her youth and her beauty, her sweet tones and looks and fond winning ways? Is the attraction that draws me to her despite myself sensual or devilish, a snare of Satan set to catch me in my pride, or is the charm as innocent as it seems to me to-night? God enlighten me and give me grace to be wise; for, whether it be for good or ill, I love her.'

Silver arrows of pale summer moonlight pierced the feathery pine-branches, evening's breath crept through the wood with a plaintive sound that was

half whisper, half sigh. It was time that Joshua and his companion should go back to the white cottage yonder on the lower ground across the meadows.

'It is getting late, sir,' said Cynthia; 'the ladies will be wanting me.'

'Yes, Cynthia; but I have a question to ask before we go. Soon after daybreak to-morrow I shall be on my way home—for I mean to walk the best part of the way—and then, unless you wish, I shall not see you for a year—perhaps never again; for who can tell how your mind may change in a year?'

'It can never change so as to forget your goodness, sir.'

'Child, you make too much of my goodness. What I did for you I would have done for the lowest, the ugliest, a leper standing outside the gate and crying, Unclean, unclean! I would have gathered a weed by the wayside, my dear, and cared for it as truly as I cared for the flower. But God chose that I should gather the fairest flower that ever grew in His earthly garden, and keep and cherish it to adorn His heavenly paradise. And this sweet flower, unawares, has grown very dear to me. Cynthia, in

your childlike gratitude you have said many words of which perchance you have not weighed the meaning. You have spoken lightly out of the innocence of your mind, but your words have gone deep into my heart. You have talked of being my servant, of working for me all the days of my life. Look up at me, love, with those sweet eyes; look at me, my cherished one, my darling, with the straight look that goes from soul to soul, and tell me if you could love me well enough to be my wife—love me well enough to live with me, and be a part of my life, the blessedest, brightest, fairest part of life, all that this earth holds for me of human happiness. I have given my daughter to her lover; henceforth I hold the second place in her heart. O Lord, let me have something that shall be all my own! I have tasted but little of temporal joys; I have given my hopes and desires for others. Before age creeps on, before my day is done, let me have something on which to pour forth my treasure of earthly love; let me be blessed like Abraham and Thy chosen ones of old, in the sacred joys of home. Child, child, it is the cry of a strong man's heart that goes forth to thee.

Answer, and answer faithfully. Do you love me well enough to be my wife?'

He held her in his arms, held her to his heart, looking down into her eyes. They had both grown accustomed to the half light of the wood by this time, and saw each other's faces very clearly; hers looking upward, pale, earnest, full of sweetness and a rapturous content, as of one in sight of her earthly heaven; his blanched with suppressed feeling, the mouth firmly set, the eyes grave and sombre.

'Answer, love, answer; and as God sees us here in this wood, under this evening sky, answer truly.'

'I love you well enough to be your servant all the days of my life,' she said in a low voice—'and to be made happy by one kind look from your eyes now and then when you stooped to remember me. I could never be your equal—could never feel myself good enough to sit by your side, to be called by your name; but I love you with all my heart and strength and mind, as I have been taught to love God.'

She slipped from his breast to his feet before he was aware, and knelt there with clasped hands, looking up at him—a lovely image of devotion.

'Not at my feet, but next my heart, dearest,' he cried, raising her from that humble posture. 'You have made me happy beyond the limit of man's earthly blessedness. If I could have known, when the path seemed most difficult, that behind the curtain of long years God held this joy in store for me, it would have been like a star shining on me, and beckoning me on. How light all present labours, all present perplexities would have seemed, measured against this reward!'

The moon shone full on the face lying on his breast. Purity, innocence, truth, a childlike love, were written there—love so blended with reverence that it had something devotional in its character. Why should the young heart ever change or fall away from affection so pure in its beginning, so holy in its growth? Why, indeed, save for the reason spoken of by the Prophet: 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?'

A moment never to be forgotten—a solemn crisis in life's history to be remembered with awe in all the years to come—a moment in which earth and

earthly things seem to fall away, and spirit speaks to spirit.

They went back through the dewy fields together, Cynthia's hand in Joshua's—the hand which was his own henceforward—a symbol of their life-long union. The sheep were running about the field, and the bell ringing. The church-clock struck nine with a sonorous knell, like the bell of Time counting the measure of man's years. A little while, a little while, and the end shall come. While your heart beats so passionately, while your hopes build so boldly, while your fancy makes palaces and earthly paradises to dwell in, time is passing, and the end is at hand. Life is but a journey, and the home where you are happiest is only an inn, from which you must be gone to-morrow.

'Dear heart alive!' cried Deborah, waking from her gentle nap to find herself in darkness; 'what's become of Cynthia, and why hasn't she brought candles and the supper-tray? We must have been asleep ever so long.'

'The heat quite overcame me,' said Priscilla,

'and Mr. Pamble is so noisy; his coarse jokes and loud vulgar laugh gave me the headache. I'm afraid Mr. Haggard must have been shocked with him.'

'I could see it in his face,' replied Deborah.

Cynthia came in with a pair of mould candles in shining brass candlesticks and snuffer-tray to match. Joshua followed, grave of countenance, and paler than usual.

'How tired you look, dear Mr. Haggard!' cried Priscilla. 'I'm afraid the sermon this morning and those noisy Pambles have wearied you. You must have a glass of cowslip wine this minute; it's very reviving.'

Joshua consented, absently, to be revived, and sipped the home-made nectar with a dreamy look, while the sisters watched him curiously. He looked like one whose spirit has detached itself temporarily from the flesh. The body was there, but the eyes saw not, the lips spoke not; it was a mere automatic body.

'I'm afraid he's ill,' whispered Priscilla to Deborah, 'and not a drop of brandy in the house.'

Joshua looked up presently, and saw two pairs of affrighted eyes gazing at him as at a spectre.

'I am ready to read and pray with you, dear friends, at the close of this peaceful day,' he said.

'It has been a day that will be remembered in Penmoyle for many a year to come,' exclaimed the ardent Priscilla.

In the placid monotony of her life the advent of such a man as Joshua made an event of mark. She was not likely to forget his rare appearances in that remote village. She had indeed cherished his image for these fifteen years past—ever since his widowhood made it a lawful thing to worship him with a more individual regard than that reverent affection which the flock gives its shepherd.

Joshua opened his pocket Bible, and read the second chapter of Ruth; Cynthia seated meekly in her accustomed place by the door. In his commentary on the text he spoke of that instinct of the heart which has been called love at first sight, but which is rather an inspiration, a divine prompting of the spirit, which leads man to his fittest helpmate. He touched tenderly on the favour which the gentle

Moabitess found in the sight of the stranger; how his heart went forth to her at the very first, even before his servants had told him her pathetic story. He dwelt on the blessedness of such an union, and how God had crowned this marriage with richest honour, His chosen servant David being descended from this stem.

Priscilla wept copiously, her sentimental soul moved deeply by Joshua's discourse; and after he had said his evening prayer, she approached him with a little gush of rapture, and exclaimed:

'Dear Mr. Haggard, it has been my privilege often to hear you eloquent, but your words were never so melting as they have been to-night. The hardest heart must have shed tears,' added Miss Priscilla, too enthusiastic to care for anatomical truth.

Joshua blushed; yes, through the dark clear skin there glowed an actual blush, as he looked at the Miss Weblings almost sheepishly.

'I thought that tender story would win your sympathy,' he said; 'and I am glad, for I want you to look with increasing favour upon my Ruth.'

He put his arm round Cynthia and drew her to his side. The fair-haired child nestled there, looking up at her mistresses half shyly, half proudly.

'What!' cried Priscilla, with a shrill scream; 'you don't mean—'

'I am like Boaz,' he said; 'I have no need to tarry any longer in doubtfulness of my own heart. This damsel has found grace in mine eyes, albeit she is a stranger. Heaven gave her to me that summer-day, on Springfield Common. Heaven has given me new thoughts and new hopes since I have known her. I am more blessed in having found her than if all the riches of all the mines in Cornwall had been poured into my lap. May God give me grace to love and cherish her, and to make the life she has trusted to me happy!'

'You are going to marry that child!' cried Priscilla, plucking at the velvet circlet on her brow in the wild agitation of the moment. 'You, a sober serious man of forty and upwards, a chit younger than your daughter!'

'If I am not too old to find a place in her heart,

I care not how young she is. It will be all the sweeter duty to protect and cherish her.'

Priscilla cast away her velvet head-band, reckless of the little mourning brooch, with her father's silver hairs behind a tiny square of crystal, which confined it on her intellectual brow. She looked wildly round the best parlour, gave a stifled shriek, a gurgle or two, flung herself on the chintz-covered sofa, grasping the hard bolster convulsively in her agony, and went into vehement hysterics.

She lay there gurgling and choking, with occasional bursts of shrill laughter, for the next ten minutes, while cold water was sprinkled over her head and face, to the detriment of her Sunday toilet and the sofa-cover.

'You shouldn't have told her quite so suddenly,' said Deborah, somewhat ashamed of this emotional display. 'She has such a mind. The shock has been too much for her. She hasn't had such a fit of hysterics since father died.'

Priscilla recovered sufficiently to be led up the corkscrew staircase, and before departing cast a piteous look at the minister.

'I should be the last to fling a shadow on your happiness,' she said, 'but I thought you'd never marry again. I thought your mind was lifted above it; or that if you did, it would be some one of a suitable age, and with a mind fit to mate with yours. But the human heart is a mystery.'

And with a strangled sob Priscilla drooped her disordered head upon her sister's shoulder, and suffered herself to be assisted up the corkscrew staircase, an operation which occasioned some bumping of heads and rapping of elbows at awkward turns in the stair.

This was the beginning of evils that came out of Joshua Haggard's second marriage; an event in the life of man to which his kindred in particular and his friends in general are especially apt to take objection; and yet the responsibility of the act is all his, and the good or ill thereof is a cup which his lips alone can drink. Whether he chains himself to a fury who shall make his days and nights miserable, or wins to his side an angel who shall shed upon his pathway the sunshine of domestic bliss, and make

his progress to the grave pleasant as a noontide ramble through a rose-garden, it is he who shall pay the penalty of a foolish choice or reap the reward of a wise one.

CHAPTER II.

'WE ARE IN LOVE'S LAND TO-DAY.'

A SLEEPLESS night shed the sober light of reason upon those clouds of sentiment which had obscured Miss Priscilla Webling's mind. 'When all is done,' said Reason, 'you know but too well that you had no hope of having Joshua for a husband, suitable as might have been such an union, blessed as you might have made his days by your cherishing and ministration. You know yourself a creature especially adapted to be a Methodist minister's wife; but his eyes have been blinded to that fact: he could not pierce the modest veil in which maidenhood enfolded you, and discern the image of the perfect wife behind it. His mind—too much given to spiritual things to be acute upon earthly matters—has been caught by the surface beauty of a foolish child. It is for you to pity rather than resent an

error for which he will doubtless pay dearly when he lies down in damp sheets, or drinks tea made with half-boiled water, or eats potatoes as hard as stones, and suffers in various other ways from the mistakes of an inexperienced housekeeper; to say nothing of the likelihood that so young a wife may be dressy and flighty, and given to standing at her door of afternoons gossipping, to the neglect of the housework.'

Thus counselled by Reason, Priscilla assisted at the seven-o'clock breakfast with a tranquil demeanour, and even smiled upon Joshua with an assumed cheerfulness, which had some element of the heroic.

'I hope you do not think my choice foolish or blameworthy,' said Joshua meekly, as Deborah helped him to fried potatoes and bacon.

'Indeed, dear Mr. Haggard, marriage is such a serious consideration—and a second marriage, where there are grown-up children, more particularly—that I don't feel qualified to form an opinion. Cynthia is a good girl, as girls go; that I should be sorry to deny, after the way she nursed me through my

quinsy last winter. But there's a wide difference between a servant-girl and a minister's wife, and a great deal will be expected of her in that position.'

'I am not afraid,' said Joshua, 'if I can but make her happy. In the innocence of her heart she has given me her love. God give me grace to keep and strengthen that affection in the days to come!'

'She has so much reason to be grateful to you,' began Priscilla.

'I am not talking of gratitude,' interrupted Joshua almost angrily. 'She has given me her love. I know not why I am so blessed; but I know that she loves me. It is the rich reward of all my days of care and toil. I have not felt my labour heavy. I have no foolish pride in my work; but the sum of it has perhaps been pleasing in the sight of Heaven, and this reward has been granted to me—love and renewed youth, a life that seems beginning again from the starting-point of twenty years. I feel as young as on the day I first preached in Penmoyle—before there was a chapel here—on the bit of green waste at the opening of the lane that leads to Mr. Pamble's farm.'

'That was four-and-twenty years ago,' said Deborah; 'for it was the very year father died, and sister and I walked through the dusty lanes in our new mourning to hear you.'

This, to Deborah's mind, was almost equal in self-sacrifice to walking over red-hot ploughshares.

'It was before we opened the school,' said Priscilla, 'and when folks were recommending us to take situations as housekeepers, instead of profiting by our education.'

'I feel as young as I felt that day—four-and-twenty years ago,' exclaimed Joshua triumphantly.

This was an intoxication of the mind which seemed to the Miss Weblings fraught with peril. It was a positive duty to say something depressing.

'Ah,' sighed Priscilla, 'if poor Mrs. Haggard could have looked forward to this in her long illness, she would have felt it trying. It's a blessing that we're not permitted to see into the future.'

'I am not going to act hastily,' said Joshua, ignoring this dismal suggestion. 'I thought it my duty to tell you my intentions without delay; but I

shall tell no one else yet awhile, not even my son and daughter. I shall leave Cynthia with you for some time longer. She shall have time for reflection—many peaceful days in which to consider the promise she has made me. If any change should come to her mind, if she should discover that she has been mistaken in her feelings towards me, I shall be ready to set her free. It will need but a word from her to loosen the bond between us. I shall tell her this before we part. If she hold steadfast to her promise of last night, I shall come back to fetch her before this year is ended. Meanwhile I know that you will be kind to her, and that she will be happy with you.'

'We have always tried to do our duty by her,' returned Deborah rather stiffly.

She could not quite forgive Mr. Haggard for his absurd choice, when the superior mind of her sister had been lying open before him for these last twenty years like a wise and valuable book, and he had not had the sense to read it.

'I'm afraid she'll be puffed up by the change in her prospects,' suggested Priscilla, 'and not so obe-

dient and dutiful as she has been. We can hardly expect it of her under the circumstances.'

'I do not think you will find any difference,' said Joshua. 'She is sincerely grateful to you for your goodness to her.'

'Yes; but in our case her gratitude does not turn into love,' retorted Priscilla sharply.

Cynthia brought in the tea-kettle to make the tea, and took it out again to be kept on the boil on the kitchen-hob, with a meekness which seemed to give the lie to her mistresses' doubts; and presently, when Joshua had finished his breakfast and went out to the kitchen to bid his newly-betrothed good-bye, he found her scrubbing the deal-table with vigorous industry, which had brought a vivid pink to the fair young face.

She put down the scrubbing-brush, and he took her in his arms and kissed her—with a kiss which was fatherly in its protecting gentleness, lover-like in its suppressed passion.

'Dearest love,' he said softly, holding her in his embrace all the while, and looking down at her with tender seriousness, 'I am going to leave you for a

few months. I am going away, dear, so that you may look into your heart and be very sure the love you talked of last night is real, and not a childish fancy which may melt away like the memory of a dream when we awake. In our sleep we wander in a beautiful garden, and clasp the hand of a friend—loved and dead, perhaps, long ago; and in the morning we awake, and there is nothing left of our dream—hardly a memory. Your love for me might be like that, Cynthia.'

'No, no,' she answered eagerly, looking up into his eyes,—'no it is real, like your goodness, like your wisdom.'

'I am old enough to be your father, Cynthia. I have a daughter older than you.'

'What has that to do with it? I did not think about your age when I began to love you.'

'When did you begin to do that, sweet one?'

'When you went away from here I felt that there was something gone out of my life, and I knew that I liked you very much. But perhaps I might never have known that I loved you if—'

She stopped, blushing deeply, and trifling with the lapel of his coat.

'If what, dearest?'

'I don't like to tell you; it is so foolish.'

'Please tell me, dear.'

'Young Mr. Price, at the Rising Sun, wanted to be my sweetheart. He used to wait for me coming out of chapel of an evening, and follow me across the street, and stop me at the garden-gate talking to me. And when he talked about loving me and wanting to marry me, I hated him dreadfully; and then I knew that I loved you.'

'And I hope you made Mr. Price quite understand that you didn't care for him?'

'O yes; I told him so very plainly, and he was rather offended, and Miss Priscilla said I was very foolish to refuse so good an offer. But you've no idea how I hated him when he talked about being fond of me.'

'God bless you, darling, and good-bye till I come back to fetch my young wife, or till you write me one little line to say you have changed your mind.'

'I shall never write that,' replied Cynthia, with conviction.

And with these words they kissed once more and parted, Joshua setting out on his homeward journey with the light heart of youth, weaving visions of this happy future as he walked in the briar-scented lanes, painting pictures of that familiar home which was soon to be beautified by Cynthia's sweet presence. It seemed to him that he had never known what beauty and grace in woman meant before he found that wanderer on the sunburnt common—before he looked down on those loose locks of palest gold, and saw the white feet gleaming under dark water, the delicate figure half-sitting, half-reclining on the grassy hillock, with the listless grace of repose.

He speculated how he could make the old home a little brighter for its new mistress. That dingy carpet in the common parlour must be exchanged for a new one. He would buy a harpsichord or one of those new pianos people talked about, and Cynthia could learn to play hymn-tunes. He would buy a gig or a four-wheeled chaise to drive his wife in, instead of the tax-cart. When Jim got steadier and

married—events which ought to happen within the next half-dozen years—Joshua told himself that he might retire from the grocery business altogether, and devote himself exclusively to the chapel. There was a cottage on the slope of the hill at the upper end of Combhaven which he fancied would be a charming home for himself and his young wife—a romantic cottage, with a garden in which some ambitious tenant had made a fountain. It seemed to the lover's fancy that this cottage, with its fountain and weeping-ash, was better adapted as a background to his picture of Cynthia than the substantial commonplace old house opposite the First and Last. Yet it would go against him to leave the old house. His father and mother had lived and died there. It was his first idea of home. No; if Cynthia were satisfied, he would stay there. And that cottage with the fountain was probably damp. Picturesqueness and rheumatism often go together.

And Judith? How would that tight-waisted, tight-lipped damsel get on with a lovely young wife? Judith must be taught to bridle that sharp tongue of hers, to put the curb on her quick temper. There

must be no biting blasts to wither his tender flower.

'I shall make Judith understand at once and for ever that she must be kind and gentle to my wife,' thought Joshua. 'She has always respected and obeyed me—I am bound to remember that.'

He was in no hurry to tell Judith, or even his faithful Naomi, of the change that had come upon his life—that startling and wondrous change which had made him a new man. It would be time enough when he took his young wife home. No one had any right to question his choice or to doubt his wisdom.

He felt somewhat embarrassed, notwithstanding these arguments, when Naomi questioned him, with a dutiful interest in all his doings, about the girl he had found on Springfield Common.

'Has she been well-behaved, father? Has she learned to read yet?'

'Yes, my dear. She has made wonderful progress.'

'And is she as pretty as when you first saw her sitting with her feet in the water, and with her hair falling loose about her shoulders?'

Naomi's fancy had pictured the scene; her father's dark face looking down at the fair-haired wanderer; the thymy hillocks and gorse-bushes and wild broom under the blue warm sky.

'I think she is even prettier.'

'What a sweet little thing she must be! I should so like to see her! If Sally were to get married now, we might have Cynthia for a servant, mightn't we, father?'

'There's not much chance of that, Naomi.'

'Of Sally's marrying? I'm not sure of that,' replied Naomi. 'I know she has thoughts of it.'

'You shall see Cynthia some day, Naomi, and I hope you will learn to love her; but it will not be as a servant. Nature has made her fit for something better than servitude. I do not mean to say that service is not worthy, or that all men and women are not equal in the eyes of their Maker. But Nature has set a mark upon us all, and we have each our appointed station. I do not think Cynthia was created to work like Sally, or to take pleasure in the things that please Sally.'

'You might get her a better place, father—as lady's-maid, for instance.'

'To be some fine lady's drudge! That would be worse rather than better. Don't concern yourself about her, my dear, till you come to know more of her. I have made up my mind as to her future life.'

'How good you are, father, to take so much trouble for a poor nameless orphan!'

'There is more selfishness than goodness in the matter, Naomi. It has been a pleasure to me to do as much for her.'

This was all that he said to his daughter about Cynthia; but he was pleased to think that Naomi had shown a friendly interest in the subject, and he fancied that Cynthia's beauty and Cynthia's sweetness would at once appeal to the girl's heart; that it would be natural for these two to love one another, and that they would cleave to each other like sisters. It never occurred to him that Cynthia, as the recipient of his charity, was quite a different person in the eyes of Naomi from the same Cynthia as his second wife; and that in proportion to his daughter's

love for him would be her disinclination to divide his affection with a new-comer and interloper. In the fulness of his content, which inclined him to see all things on the sunnier side, he could foresee no domestic difficulty, unless it were a little extra snappishness on the part of Judith, an exhibition of temper which he meant to put down with a high hand.

He was very happy. It seemed as if his capacity for full and perfect happiness had never been called into play till now. His life had been prosperous, successful; but the rainbow hues of joy had not entered largely into the fabric of his existence. A gleam of vivid colour here and there had flashed across the dull gray woof; but now warp and woof were all brightness and colour. He saw all things under an altered aspect, apparelled in the beauty of a dream. Nature, which he had viewed hitherto with a mild regard, moved him now to loving worship. He thanked God for having set him in so fair a world, for having given him such a goodly heritage. In his daily walks he was continually repeating to himself those psalms which breathe joyfulness and

thanksgiving, those canticles which tell of triumph and rapture for the Lord's chosen people. There was more eloquence in his sermons, more fervour in his prayers. His congregation even felt stirred by that strong floodtide of joy which filled his own breast.

In this state of mind he was naturally disposed to look with an indulgent eye upon Oswald Pentreath's wooing. He remembered with a guilty sheepishness what the Squire had said to him—that if he, Joshua, were going to be married he would not be for such long delay; and moved by this recollection he told Oswald one evening in the wilderness that, if he liked, the wedding might take place early in the year—say in March, when the spring flowers were coming in and the days getting bright.

'Now that your father has given his consent there is less reason for me to hold you to the letter of your promise,' said Joshua. 'If you are quite sure of your affection for Naomi—quite sure she is the one woman you would choose for yourself out of all the world—it makes little difference whether you marry her in March or July.'

'There is no fear of any change in my feelings,' answered Oswald; 'I love her better every day, and honour her more as I get to know her better. She is the noblest and best of women. I feel myself small and weak in comparison with her.'

Oswald lost no time in telling Naomi that the length of his apprenticeship, as it pleased him to call it, had been lessened.

'We are to be married early in March, Naomi, when the woods are yellow with daffodils; and you are coming to brighten that dismal old house of ours. I shall be a respectable married man by midsummer. I must get my father to buy me a gig, and put Herne into harness, so that I may drive you about. We shall be a regular Darby and Joan.'

Naomi blushed at an imaginary picture of herself sitting beside Oswald in a high-wheeled gig, with that unreliable horse swaying the vehicle against banks and hedges, and making wild bolts round awkward corners. The idea of driving with her husband in a gig like old married people seemed to bring their marriage closer home to her than any gush of poetry on the lover's part could have done.

'And we must think of smartening the old rooms a little bit before you come to us,' continued Oswald cheerily. 'I daresay a coat of whitewash for the ceilings will be about as much as the Squire will care to afford; but I must see what Phœbe—that's our old housemaid, you know—can do with a few yards of chintz and muslin. She's a capital manager, poor old thing, and has made her elbow-bones twice their natural size with rubbing the panelling and furniture. There's no such polish in Devonshire, I should think, as poor Phœbe's elbow-grease. I see her at it sometimes at six o'clock in the morning when I'm going for an early ride; and I often wonder why she takes so much out of herself to embellish rooms that hardly any one sees. I fancy it must be a part of her religion. There are Shakers, you know, and Jumpers; perhaps there is a sect of Rubbers—an extra devout sect, like the Essenes.'

Naomi looked disapprovingly here. As a dissenter herself she was not prepared to think lightly of even Shakers or Jumpers, who had doubtless some reason for the faith that was in them—an innate conviction of truth, perhaps, so strong as to counter-

balance the ridiculousness of their outward manifestations.

'But when you come the old oak panels will have their use,' said Oswald gaily. 'They will serve as mirrors to reflect your imperial beauty. I always fancy you like the good Agrippinas and Julias, Naomi. There were one or two virtuous Julias, you know, though the majority turned their attention the other way; and there may have been a decent Agrippina, though there I'm doubtful. I always picture you as a Roman lady, with golden embroidery on your robes, and a golden diadem on that dark hair of yours.'

Naomi had read neither Tacitus nor Gibbon; all she knew about Rome was that St. Paul had acquired the Roman franchise, and that the Romans had persecuted the early Christians. But she knew that Oswald meant to praise her beauty when he likened her to these imperial ladies of doubtful character.

These two also were very happy, but with a more quiet joy than Joshua's. The bloom of novelty had been worn off their love by this time. They had grown accustomed to look forward to a life spent

together; to think of themselves as bound to each other. Oswald surveyed his future with a tranquil contentment. He liked Naomi better every day, leaned upon her more entirely, felt her superiority and his own weaker nature, and looked forward confidently to the part she was to play in his life. Naomi's feelings lay deeper, and but seldom found expression in words. She could not speak playfully of a love which was the most solemn element in her life. She thought of her happiness—of this most perfect boon Heaven had given her in Oswald's love—with a subdued sense of awe. If he had never loved her; if he were to be taken from her? She dared not picture to herself the hideous blank which life must have been in the first case, nor the gloomy ruin life must become in the second. Sometimes she recalled that dreadful day when the storm had swept over Combhaven and her father's strong arm had snatched Oswald from the greedy devouring waves. If he had not been saved, and she had never known him! She was not metaphysician enough to contemplate life under such seemingly impossible conditions.

Aunt Judith's attitude of mind in relation to the lovers was one of equable disapprobation. She thought that Joshua was sacrificing to Baal by giving his daughter five thousand pounds in order that the misguided young woman might be raised from her proper position in life to a station for which Providence had never intended her. Five thousand pounds at five per cent meant two hundred and fifty pounds a year, Judith reflected, or nearly five pounds a week, which division made the money seem a great deal more, as it was thus brought nearer the housewife's eye. Why the entire housekeeping expenses of Mr. Haggard's establishment—after debiting all goods had out of the shop against the house—seldom came to more than five pounds a week. And Joshua was to surrender all that money to make his daughter a fine lady.

The idea of this monetary sacrifice weighed heavily upon aunt Judith. She had begun a system of small economies as a kind of set-off against Naomi's dowry. Puddings now only graced the board thrice a week, and those were puddings of the homeliest and least expensive character; puddings

of a substantial and filling character specially dear to prudent housekeepers, as they do not require eggs in their composition, and are for the most part independent of butter. The tea-table was furnished even more sparingly than of old, and, with a view to the economising of butter, the careful manager pressed upon the maturer taste of her nephew and niece that thick and slab molasses which their childish fancies had affected. She doled out the week's allowance of soap more grudgingly than of old, and was a despot in the matter of soda.

'I don't know what's come to your aunt, Miss Naomi,' the aggrieved Sally remarked despondently. 'It's as much as I can wash out a pair of white stockings for Sunday afternoon without her going on about my vanity and extravagance, and throwing Jezebel in my teeth, as if I was the wickedest young woman in Combhaven.'

These infinitesimal savings, though they inflicted some annoyance on the household, could go about as far towards counterbalancing the loss of five thousand pounds as the laborious exertions of an industrious beaver in the construction of a dam designed

to stem the waters of Niagara; yet these vain efforts afforded some mental solace to aunt Judith's perturbed mind. She scraped the butter off her bread, and felt herself a domestic martyr.

'There'll be fine flaunting when she's a married woman and her own mistress,' thought Judith, 'with two hundred and fifty pounds a year for her own spending—silk gowns trimmed with thread-lace on workadays, I daresay. We sha'n't see her often at chapel, I should think. She'll be going to church for the sake of sitting in a big pew among the gentry. If I were Joshua I'd as leave have my daughter dead and buried as married to a fine gentleman that would look down upon me.'

Judith had never been able to get rid of the idea that in his secret soul Oswald Pentreath despised the Haggards and their surroundings. Her narrow mind could not conceive it possible that the son of a landowner could believe in his equality with shopkeepers; that the odour of soap and candles was not hateful to the nostrils of a gentleman who sealed his letters with a coat of arms that looked almost royal, and bore a name which was engraved on the oldest

brazen tablet in the chancel. She was unable to understand that easy-going temper of Oswald's, to which rank and wealth were of small moment compared with the blessings of personal well-being and the gratification of one's own inclination. She had a lurking conviction that Mr. Pentreath, be he never so polite and respectful, was secretly laughing at her; that he did not admire her Sunday gown, and thought her pronunciation vulgar; and that he encouraged that impudent jackanapes Jim in the practice of grimacing behind her shoulder as she poured out the tea or carved the cold joint at supper. This conviction and a general sense of injury, chiefly referable to that marriage portion of five thousand pounds, made aunt Judith unpleasant company to herself at this time, and not the most agreeable company for other people.

The young people were happy after their tranquil fashion, untouched by the blighting influence of this aggrieved spinster. They had their afternoon rambles together, and Naomi made progress in the art of pencil landscape, sitting for many a happy hour copying the bold curved lines of the hartstongue and

the delicate tracery of parsley and oakleaf fern, or the larger outlines of elm or beech; while Oswald lay on the grass at her side reading *Marmion* or *Ivanhoe*. Gentle, peaceful time—a cup filled to the brim with perfect joy—to be remembered in days to come, when the memory shall be life's crowning sorrow.

The lovers had been employed thus one afternoon in August. Oswald had just read that intense and dramatic scene of Sir Walter Scott's most romantic poem when Constance de Beverley defies her pitiless judges. There had been an ominous stillness in the air for the last half-hour, and the birds were uttering those subdued twitterings by which they seem to warn one another of approaching evil; but Naomi had been too much absorbed by the story to give any heed to these whisperings of a coming storm, when one big drop falling on her pencilled group of ferns startled her out of her complacency. Oswald had been reading the stirring lines somewhat sleepily, the heavy air under those tall elms exercising a narcotic effect upon his senses, and he too had been heedless of a change in the heavens.

'Why, I declare it's raining!' he exclaimed, when one of those big drops had alighted upon his nose; 'and what a black sky! I'm afraid we're in for a storm. And you in that thin dress, Naomi! Let us get to the house as fast as we can.'

'To the Grange?' cried Naomi, with a look of alarm, as if he had proposed the most awful thing in the world.

'Why not, love? It is to be your home next spring. Is it too much to ask a little shelter from the old roof to-day?'

'The Squire might not like—' faltered Naomi.

'He would be delighted. He has not asked you and your father formally to visit him, for then, you see, you would be visitors, and it is against his principles to squander his substance upon entertaining people; but if you were to drop in upon him unawares he would be enchanted. Come, dear; the rain-drops are falling faster—and there's the first thunder-clap.'

It pealed among the trees, sounding so close to them that it seemed a local thunder-clap intended for them in particular.

'What a threatening sound it has, Oswald!' said Naomi, as they hurried towards the little gate which opened from the wood into the path.

'Yes; one can fancy the first murderer hearing such a peal as he fled. It sounds like the voice of Nemesis, doesn't it? There's a blinding flash; run, Naomi!'

They were at the gate by this time, and only a broad stretch of turf lay between them and the house. The Squire's oxen kept the turf closely cropped, and Oswald and his companion were able to run quickly over the short crisp grass. Naomi arrived at the porch with her cambric dress only lightly sprinkled by the rain.

The hall-door stood open, and Oswald led her in. He tried the handle of his father's den; but that sanctuary was locked. The Squire was out, and had the key of his study in his pocket, no doubt, according to custom. Naomi stood in the grave old hall, looking about her wonderingly. It was the first time she had ever entered this house, in which she was to live and die. She felt as if it were a solemn moment in her life—a moment to be remembered

as the beginning of an epoch. This house was henceforward to mean something more for her than a tradition or a feature in a familiar landscape: it was to embody her idea of home.

She looked round her doubtfully. The fine square hall; the brown-oak panelling, adorned with half a dozen family portraits browner and darker than the old oak; the wide shallow staircase with its solid balustrade; the pavement of white and black marble, had doubtless a certain dignity and beauty of their own. She felt that she was beneath a roof that had sheltered many generations; but there was a bleakness and barrenness in the scene that chilled her. A house built for the accommodation of a large family and numerous servants must needs have a cheerless and empty look when it falls into the occupation of a miser's shrunken household.

'Let me show you the rooms that are to be all your own,' said Oswald, opening the door of a long drawing-room, an apartment so rarely used that it had assumed a ghost-like air, as of a chamber conscious of old family secrets, and made gloomy by the mysteries of the past. It was a narrow panelled room,

painted white and salmon, and this very delicacy of tint, which would have made the apartment cheerful under favourable conditions, enhanced its chill phantasmal aspect in the gray light of this thunderous afternoon.

All the furniture was at least a century old. Naomi had never imagined such spindle-legged tables, such narrow high-backed chairs, such a general straightness and spareness of outline. The bareness of all ornament, save the small oval mirrors and crystal candelabra, and the lack of colour, struck even her inexperienced eye, which had been accustomed only to the plainest furniture. The brocaded window-curtains, once sea-green, had faded to a neutral tint; the seats and backs of chairs and sofas were covered with holland. There were no books, no pictures.

Oswald watched his betrothed, expectant of some expression of admiration. He fancied she would be delighted with rooms so much larger and more aristocratic than those in which she had lived all her life.

'It's a handsome room, isn't it?' he asked. 'Forty feet by eighteen.'

'It's very long,' said Naomi, rather stupidly her lover thought.

'Perhaps you'd like to see the dining-room?'

'Very much.'

Anything would be a relief after this ghastly saloon, with its white cold walls and general emptiness.

They crossed the hall and entered the dining-room. Here brownness and gloom replaced the ghostly whiteness of the saloon. Here too the furniture was scanty; but there was more homeliness, a greater look of occupation, this being the room in which the Squire and his son lived from January to December. There were newspapers, books, and writing-materials on a table in the bay-window; there were whips and walking-sticks in the corners; the large oaken sideboard was adorned with a pair of solid old silver tankards, and surmounted by a portrait of the present Squire, painted in the bloom of youth, when waistcoats were worn long and 'Wilkes and Liberty' was still a party cry.

The lightning flashed across Naomi's face as she looked out at the large bay-window, surveying that

neatly-kept garden in front of the house, which was separated by a close-cut holly hedge from the neglected domain beyond, the wide stretch of turf which had once been a lawn sacred from the feet of cattle, and on which the Squire's store oxen now browsed at their ease. He could see no good in land which produced nothing—grass that was mown at much cost of labour only to be thrown on the manure-heap.

The day had grown darker, and the thunder-peals seemed to shake the old chimney, down whose wide throat there came gusts of wind and rain. It was an awful chimney for the wind to howl in; and the Squire and his son, sitting silently by the hearth on a gloomy winter evening, had often felt as if evil spirits were howling wild threatenings at them from the house-top.

Naomi looked at the dark hearth with an affrighted glance, as if she had heard the family banshee shrieking at her.

'What an awful noise!' she said.

'It's only the wind, love. And now I must show you the family portraits, and my mother's sitting-

room, which will be yours so soon. I think it is the most cheerful room in the house.'

Naomi was glad to think that she was going to see something cheerful. The gloom of the dining-room had been more depressing than the ghostly pallor of the drawing-room.

They went up the uncarpeted staircase to a gallery which occupied the whole length of the house, with a row of long narrow windows looking westward, and a deep oaken seat in each window. Here there were family portraits of the usual character; sea-pieces, battle-pieces, fruit-pieces, and a Dutch picture or two to give a touch of human interest to the collection. Here too there were some old delf jars, filled with dried rose-leaves—roses that had been gathered by fingers that were now clay, and which exhaled an odour of the past.

Oswald showed his betrothed the untenanted rooms, all neatly kept by the indefatigable housemaid. The room that had been his mother's was the prettiest Naomi had seen yet. The white walls, embellished with carved garlands of fruit and flowers; the old furniture, painted white; a narrow

old-fashioned bookcase on each side of the fireplace; cabinets of shells and sea-weeds between the windows, local shells and local weeds, which the Squire's young wife had collected in her idle uneventful days.

Naomi went eagerly to look at the books. They were many of them strange to her even in name. Old poets—Spenser, Cowley, Waller, Dryden, Prior, Pope—in white vellum, with gilded lettering. The Essayists, in neat duodecimo volumes, with faded calf bindings; Richardson's voluminous novels, in thin octavos, bound in brown. Naomi read the titles with keenest interest. The great world of books was an unknown region to her, save for such feeble glimmer as was afforded by the *Pocket Magazine*, a folio Milton, with awful mezzotint pictures of Sin and Death, Satan and his Council, which she used to look at shudderingly in her childhood, and those books of a theological or devotional character which formed the staple of the minister's small collection. Joshua had never been a great reader, save of his Bible and those good old Puritan divines whose teaching was after his own heart. His life had been too full and busy to admit of his acquiring

the habits of a student. He read the Scriptures, or Baxter's *Saints' Rest*, or Law's *Serious Call* by the wayside.

'What dear little books!' exclaimed Naomi, admiring the neat rows of thin volumes, literature spread over a wide surface.

'They all belonged to my grandfather, and came to my mother at his death. She was very fond of them, the poets especially.'

'I did not know there were so many poets. I knew of Pope and Spenser, but all these other names are strange to me. Why have you never told me about them?'

'They are dead, my dear; gone to the limbo of forgotten genius. Byron sent the whole crew to Hades. They have a kind of fossil life in old-fashioned libraries, like flies in amber. Their music was sweet to mawkishness, their loves and sufferings were as unreal as their periwigs; they were the poets of a patchbox and powder period.'

He took out a volume of Waller and read the 'Lines to Amoret,' that elegant excuse for being in love with two women at once:

'Amoret! as sweet and good
As the most delicious food,
Which, but tasted, does impart
Life and gladness to the heart.
Sacharissa's beauty's wine,
Which to madness doth incline:
Such a liquor as no brain
That is mortal can sustain.'

'Not a bad definition of the love that satisfies and the love that intoxicates, is it, Naomi?' asked Oswald, as he closed the book. 'These periwigged poets reduced love to a science. You are my Amoret, Naomi, and have given life and gladness to my heart.'

'I hope you may never meet your Sacharissa,' replied Naomi gravely, 'since it seems that poets can love two women at once.'

'My dearest, that was written in the days of Charles II., when poets were fops and courtiers, and it was incumbent on a court poet to have a new mistress as often as he had a new coat. It was a scenic age, unreal as a stage play; and yet there were true lovers and broken hearts while Charles Stuart was king; but you will find no trace of them among his poets.'

'I'm afraid I'm not clever enough to like that kind of poetry.'

'But you like my mother's room, Naomi?'

'It is lovely.'

'I am so glad to hear you say that. It will be your own after next March.'

'I have been trying to think of this house as my home, Oswald; but I have such a strange feeling about it. I cannot imagine myself living here. I cannot make a picture of our new life. It all seems far away and shadowy, like my idea of the life to come, which neither my own faith nor my father's teaching could ever make real or visible to me. I must have a very weak imagination.'

'Perhaps you have too much common sense, Naomi. You will not give your fancies scope. You think of yourself as Naomi Haggard living in your father's house in Combhaven, and you can't realise the fact that next year you will be Naomi Pentreath, and sole mistress of these desolate old rooms. Your coming will alter everything, dear. Even my father looks forward to it with pleasant anticipations.'

'He is very good. If it were not foolish or even

wicked to give heed to such fancies, I should think that this feeling of mine was a presentiment—that God does not intend me ever to live the happy life you speak of. It is such a settled feeling in my mind to-day; it comes between me and my happiness, just as those stormy clouds come between us and the day.'

'Naomi!'

'O, it is because I love you so dearly, Oswald! I cannot believe that Heaven means me to be so perfectly happy all my life, to have no sorrows, no trials, —I who have been taught that our journey on earth is to lead us through thorny places,—your love given to me in all its fulness. It is too much to expect from Providence.'

'My dearest, you have been taught a gloomy creed. Do you suppose Providence has never favoured true lovers—never smiled on a happy union before our time? There are old men and women who loved each other fifty years ago just as faithfully as you and I love to-day, and who have climbed the hill of life and gone down into the valley hand-in-hand. Providence means us to be happy for the

most part, I believe, Naomi. Earth's most miserable men are those who have made their own sorrows. That is my creed.'

The Squire's harsh croak was heard in the hall below at this moment, and made an end of the conversation. Oswald took Naomi down to greet her future father-in-law, who had ridden home from one of his outlying farms in the rain, and was changing his coat and boots with the assistance of the old butler.

He stopped in the operation to kiss Naomi.

'We were caught in the storm, father, while we were sketching in the wood,' said Oswald. 'I brought Naomi in for shelter. I've been showing her my mother's sitting-room.'

'Very proper. It will be hers when she's married. She'll keep her accounts there, and do her sewing; won't you, my dear? My shirts and cravats are in a wretched state. It'll be a blessing to have a clever young woman like you to look after them. What a dreadful storm! It will do no end of mischief to the corn where it isn't cut—an excuse for tenants being backward with their Christmas rent.'

'The rain has stopped, I think,' said Naomi timidly, looking out through the open door, 'and I must go home to tea.'

'Never mind your tea, my dear. Oswald shall get you a dish of tea before you go,' said the Squire, in a gush of hospitality.

But Naomi declared that her father would be alarmed at her absence; and the storm being really over, Oswald and she set out for Combhaven.

CHAPTER III.

'SHE IS FAST MY WIFE.'

SEPTEMBER was nearly ended. Harvest homes were over, and in Combhaven there was a general impression that winter was a season in the immediate future, and that linsey and merino would be soon the only wear. Household fires began to have a cheery look in the dusk, and ruddy light flickered on the walls and ceilings of cosy parlours at tea-time,—in that dim hour when the busiest housewife might lay aside her daily task of making or mending, and fold her hands for a brief span, with a virtuous sense of having earned the luxury of repose, while she discussed the character or prospects of her neighbours, or talked of that last dreadful murder chronicled in the county papers, or the latest scandal about England's crownless queen.

Joshua had gone on another journey in this tranquil autumn weather. He had not told his family

much about the object or design of this last excursion, but had contented himself with stating that it was a matter of business which called him away, and that he should be absent at most a week.

Judith was not a little offended at this reticence.

'I don't know what's come over your father that he's taken to gadding,' she said to Naomi. 'He's never been the same man since he went to open young Wild's chapel. One would think it had turned his head. And yet it was no great honour for him to be asked to do it—an out-of-the-way place like that, where the people are as ignorant as negro slaves, I daresay.'

'I can see no change in father,' replied Naomi. 'He is as good as he has always been, and as thoughtful for others. If there is any change, it is that he seems kinder than ever.'

'Ah!' exclaimed Judith, with vexation; 'what's the use of talking to girls in love? It's throwing away good words. You've no eyes nor ears for any one but your lover. If you were in the business you'd see the change in your father fast enough. Half his time his wits are wool-gathering.'

'Perhaps he's thinking of his sermons, aunt.'

'He never used to think of 'em when he was behind his counter.'

Noami had no further explanation to offer. It had indeed seemed to her of late that her father was kinder and more sympathetic than she had ever known him to be since the days of her childhood, when she had been his prattling companion in many a rustic walk. He had entered into her feelings about Oswald, he had talked to her of her future; and to Oswald himself he had been all kindness and indulgence. Never had her home been pleasanter to her, or her life happier, than during the last three months. Perhaps this is why she had found it so difficult to imagine herself transferred to any other home, the scene of her life shifted from the homely house in the High-street to the gloomy dignity of the Grange.

Joshua had been absent more than ten days, a breach of faith upon which aunt Judith enlarged with some bitterness.

'A stranger in the pulpit, and our last butter-cask nearly empty. If that isn't a change in your

father I don't know the meaning of the word. But some people can twist words any way; one 'ud need a new dictionary to understand 'em,' exclaimed the anxious housewife, as she and Naomi sat together at tea in the glow of an afternoon fire.

Jim had gone to Barnstaple to order goods. He was gradually emerging from the chrysalis of boyhood, and showing an aptitude for business which his aunt lauded as the crowning ornament of manhood. He was sharp and energetic, intensely matter of fact, and more eager for gain than his father cared to see him, but a good boy withal, soft-hearted and kindly.

'Perhaps father may be home to-night,' said Naomi soothingly.

'Ah, that's what you said last night, and the night before last. If he isn't home to-night or to-morrow there'll be no service on Sunday, for Mr. Scrupel only promised for the one Sabbath. And there'd be a pass for things to come to! How could your father hold his head up in Combhaven after that?'

'I am sure my father won't neglect his duty.'

'Won't he? How about our next cask of butter? Where's that to come from, I should like to know, before we've been out of Irish ever so long? It was more than I would take upon myself to write to Ireland for it.'

'You might have ordered another cask, aunt.'

'I wouldn't be so venturesome. A deal of thanks I should get for my pains if the butter turned out rancid. No, Naomi; if your father neglects his business he must bear the brunt of his own conduct; and if there's no service on the Sabbath—'

'There will be service,' cried Naomi, starting from her chair at the sound of a vehicle drawing up in front of the gate. 'That's father!'

'Why, there's no coach to bring him at this time, child. The Barnstaple mail won't be in for a good hour. Why, bless us and save us, if it isn't a post-shay, with a trunk on the roof too!' exclaimed aunt Judith, looking out of the window. 'Your father took nothing with him but a bag, and unless he was gone clean out of his mind he wouldn't come home in a shay.'

'He may be ill,' cried Naomi, alarmed; for this

apparition of a post-chaise was one of those startling appearances which must mean something out of the common—possibly evil.

'It must be a mistake,' said aunt Judith, following Naomi into the passage. 'No, there's Joshua getting out, and no more the matter with him than there is with me,' she added, in a tone of disgust.

Yes, there was Joshua confronting them in the twilight, with a curious look on his dark face, a kind of shy triumph, as of one half ashamed of a great happiness. He drew Naomi to him, and kissed her with more warmth of feeling than he had ever shown after so short a severance.

'How is my dear daughter?' he asked gently.

'Very well, father, and very glad to have you back again.'

'We're all but out of Irish butter,' said Judith accusingly from the obscurity of the passage.

'Ah, Judith, is that you? Never mind the butter. We'll soon set things right,' replied the minister, going back to the chaise.

'You won't get another cask till the end of next week, with all your cleverness. I thought you'd

broken a leg at the least, or you'd never have come home in a shay,' added Judith.

'I came in a chaise because I had some one to bring with me, my dear,' replied Joshua calmly.

He handed out a girl—a slim girlish figure, a lily face under a gipsy bonnet tied with a broad white ribbon. Naomi saw tender blue eyes looking up at her beseechingly in the twilight, and rosebud lips that were faintly tremulous. She had never before beheld such flower-like beauty, loveliness so delicate in form or colouring.

Joshua put the stranger's hand under his arm and led her into the house, and into the firelit parlour; Judith falling back against the passage wall as they went by, as if she had made way for a spectre; Naomi following her father full of wonder.

'I have brought you a companion and friend, Naomi,' said Joshua, when they were all in the parlour, aunt Judith having followed automatically like Hamlet after the Ghost. 'I have brought you some one whom you must love and cherish for my sake.'

'If you've brought this young woman to help in

the business, you may give her the drapery department altogether. I wash my hands of it from this moment!' exclaimed Judith, awful in her indignation.

'I have brought her to occupy the first place in my household, as she holds the first place in my heart,' answered Joshua. 'This is Cynthia Haggard, my wife.'

Sister and daughter stared at the minister with wonder-stricken countenances, pallid with horror. This calm announcement of his went so far beyond their ideas of the possible—this fact of a second marriage was an event so wide of their wildest dreams—that both aunt and niece were dumb. To both it seemed that Joshua must have gone out of his mind; that he must be talking distractedly under the spell of demoniac possession, rather than that this thing could be true—this slender flower-girl the grave preacher's second wife.

Joshua Haggard looked at the two women, surprised at the consternation his words had caused. Having once made up his mind that Cynthia was his fittest helpmate, created for him by his God, as

Eve for Adam, it had not occurred to him that other people could have any occasion to wonder at his choice. Her youth, her beauty, were blessings which Heaven had bestowed upon him with the free gift of her love. She loved him, she had chosen him; gladly, willingly she had nestled in his arms, and yielded him a love which was almost worship. She had spanned the gulf of years that yawned between them; she had flown to him as a bird to its nest. By her free choice she had justified his boldness in loving her. Had any one else the right to count his years, or see unfitness in this union of youth and maturity, if she had not done so?

He was angry at his daughter's blank look of surprise. From Judith he had expected rebellion, and he took no heed of her mute horror.

'You do not give my wife a very warm welcome, Naomi,' he said, with suppressed indignation. 'I had expected more from your sense of duty, if not from your affection.'

'Forgive me, father,' said Naomi, with a look of unspeakable pain. Those deliberate words of Joshua's had shown her that this thing was very

real. 'I was so surprised, I could not speak.' And then, going up to Cynthia, she put out her hand and said gently, 'I am very glad to see you.'

Cynthia took the proffered hand, which was cold as ice, bent her graceful head, and kissed the cold fingers tearfully.

'I am sorry you should have been so surprised,' she said. 'I asked Mr. Haggard to tell you before we were married, but he thought it was better not.'

'I fancied my marriage would have been a pleasant surprise for my daughter. I thought she might be glad to know that when she leaves me I shall still have some one to care for me—'

Aunt Judith's overcharged breast relieved itself by a groan.

'Some one young and bright and pleasant for my companion.'

Judith groaned rather louder than before.

'For the rest, I had no one's leave or license to ask for my marriage. And now, Judith, perhaps you'll be good enough to get us some tea, while I go out and settle with the postboy. We've had a long drive from Barnstaple. Naomi, you can show Cynthia

the way up-stairs, and help her to take off her cloak and bonnet. My room is ready, I suppose?'

'It's ready for *you*,' replied Judith; 'I don't know whether it's good enough for Mrs. Haggard'—throwing a spiteful intensity into the mere utterance of the name which showed great power of expression. 'She may be used to something better; though I might have known what was going to happen when you ordered new chintz for the bedstead and windows.'

'What is good enough for me will be good enough for my wife,' said Joshua, looking fondly after his bride as she left the room with Naomi. 'And now bestir yourself, Judith, like a kind soul, and give us a comfortable tea—a dish of ham and eggs, or something substantial. Cynthia ate hardly any dinner.'

'Cynthia!' ejaculated Judith, as if suddenly awakened from a state of semi-consciousness; 'why, that's the name of the young woman you found on the common.'

'It is.'

'And you've married that young woman—a tramp, a servant-girl!'

'I have married a lovely and innocent girl, whom Providence designed to be the blessing of my later years,' replied Joshua. 'God gave her to me for my own that day on the common. She has loved me from that day, and I am not sure that my love for her was not born in me then. My thoughts have followed her and cared for her all the time, though I only knew last midsummer how dear she had become to me. You look at me as if I was talking a strange tongue, Judith.'

'It might as well be Hebrew for my understanding of it,' answered Judith. 'However, you've made your bed and you can lie upon it. You don't want my leave or license, as you say; no man wants leave or license to play the fool. That's an act of free will with most folks.'

'Come, Judith,' cried the minister sternly, 'if you think that I am going to submit to insolence or insult in a matter that touches me so nearly as this you are mistaken. A man's worst foes are those of his own household. I will have no enemy to share my daily bread and my daily prayer. If you and I are to live together, you must love my wife as you

love me. She is a part of me—the brighter, better part. An insult to her is twice an insult to me, and I shall resent it twice as keenly. And now, Judith, shake hands upon this, and take it into your heart; or else find some other shelter than this roof before you lie down to-night. No one shall live in my house that is an enemy to my wife.'

'That's short notice,' said Judith grimly. 'Well, there's my hand. You've been a good brother to me, and I've not been a bad sister to you. We won't quarrel about a—pretty face. May you be happy!'

They shook hands—heartily upon Joshua's side, with a shade of reservation on Judith's. The minister felt that he had conquered; but these household victories sometimes leave behind them the seed of future warfare.

Judith bustled out to prepare a meal for the travellers; and soon there was a cheerful hissing sound—an odour of fried ham from the kitchen, where Judith stood over the frying-pan with a moody brow, while Sally obeyed her orders in fear and wonder.

'Get out the best tea-things and the plated

candlesticks, and get a pair of wax-candles from the shop,' said Judith; at which command Sally stood open-mouthed and speechless. There had been no such preparations since the last tea-party.

'Your master has got married, Sally. We must show him how pleased we are.'

'Married!' cried Sally. 'Is it Mrs. Trimly?'

Mrs. Trimly was a corpulent widow, with a very respectable fortune that had been made in a tan-pit. She occupied a large red-brick house—her own—at the upper end of Combhaven; she wore silk gowns every afternoon, gold spectacles, and the smartest caps in the town, and was a devoted disciple of Joshua's, wheezing through the service every Sunday morning, and sometimes guilty of nasal breathings of an unmistakable character on a Sunday afternoon.

To Sally it seemed the most natural thing in the world that Joshua should espouse the tanner's widow, although she was fifteen years his senior, and a sufferer from high feeding and chronic asthma. Sally had made up her mind ever so long ago, on the occasion of a state tea-drinking, that Mrs. Trimly looked

with peculiar favour on the minister, and that the comfortably-furnished brick house, with its twenty acres of orchard and meadow, as well as a fortune in the Funds, might be Joshua's for the asking.

'No,' said Judith; 'it isn't Mrs. Trimly. That would have been a sensible marriage, if you like. But when men of my brother's age marry they don't think of pleasing sensible people. They marry to please their eye, Sally. Your new mistress has got flaxen hair and blue eyes, Sally. That's enough for my brother. I hope you'll like her, and that you'll take the same pains with polishing the furniture that you have taken in my time.'

'You are not going away, are you, mum?' gasped Sally, with a vision of a paradisiacal life opening before her almost too dazzling for the mental eye.

'No, Sally, I am not going away; but I'm going to be a cipher,' replied Judith severely.

Sarah's spirits sank. She did not know the meaning of that substantive cipher, though she had a distant acquaintance with the same word as a verb. But she felt that so long as Miss Judith remained upon the scene her toil would know no relaxation.

Meanwhile the two girls—wife and daughter—were up-stairs in Joshua's bedroom, stealing shy glances at each other by the dim light of a candle which Naomi held while Cynthia stood before the dressing-table taking off her bonnet.

There were tears in the young wife's eyes, and a sad look about the sweet rosy mouth, as she smoothed her bright hair with Joshua's hard black brush, looking in the glass at a misty reflection of that half-sorrowful, half-frightened face. Inexperienced as she was in the varieties of humanity, instinct was keen enough to teach her that her husband's marriage was distasteful to his kindred, that there was no loving welcome for her in this strange home.

She looked at Naomi with unspeakable awe. Was this the affectionate daughter, the tender companion and friend Joshua had promised her? That tall erect figure, that nobly-chiselled face, with its crown of raven hair bound in a thick coil round a high comb on the summit of the head, inspired admiration, but held love at a distance. Cynthia felt that she could never be familiar with this handsome stepdaughter; and yet the face was like

Joshua's, and for that reason must needs seem dear to her.

'I am so sorry your father did not tell you sooner,' she began falteringly. 'I'm afraid his marrying me has made you unhappy—'

'It has surprised me very much,' Naomi answered gravely. 'I have never thought of my father marrying—the idea never came into my head. If any one had suggested it, I should have been angry. And you are so young—so much fitter to be his daughter than his wife.'

'No wife could love and honour him more than I do,' said Cynthia, the tears streaming down her cheeks.

'No one could know him and not honour him,' replied the daughter proudly. 'Don't cry; I am not blaming you. I have no right to blame him. I don't want to speak unkindly to you, still less to speak undutifully of my father; but his marriage is a great surprise.'

Here Naomi broke down, and the two young women performed a sobbing duet. Naomi was the first to recover.

'I am very wicked,' she said remorsefully. 'As if my dear father had not the right to be happy in his own way. I am jealous, unreasonable, abominable. Poor little thing'—drawing Cynthia to her with protecting tenderness—'don't cry. I am not so cruel or so ungrateful as I must have seemed just now. But I love my father so dearly, and I thought I should have him always all my own; and the idea that he could love any one else more than me was too bitter, just at first. I was selfish, cruel, undutiful. Dry your tears, dear; we must be fond of each other for my father's sake.'

Cynthia's sobs ceased. She clung lovingly to the tall figure, hanging on it like ivy on an oak.

'O, if you will love me a little I shall be so happy,' said the girl-wife. 'He ought to have told you. I know I must seem an intruder. But if you could know how I love him; how from the first—when he took me under his care, a poor runaway creature, without a friend, used to hard usage and hard words—from the first I worshipped him! He was so true, so strong, a rock of defence. I feared no one when he had taken me under his care.'

'Yes, he told me how he found you,' said Naomi thoughtfully. 'Poor child!'

This was the waif of whom her father had spoken —the girl in whose story she had felt a tender pitying interest, never dreaming that this nameless wanderer was to rob her of her father's heart.

'Did he tell you that I was a heathen then,' asked Cynthia solemnly, 'knowing nothing, believing nothing, without one hope beyond my daily life —and that was altogether hopeless? I had known no father on earth, I knew of no Father in heaven. I thought death was the end of all things, and I sometimes longed to die.'

'Poor child!' repeated Naomi, with grave pity.

'Poor then,' said Cynthia, 'the poorest of the poor. But from that blessed day rich beyond measure. "Henceforward there is laid up for me a crown of glory."'

There was no touch of sanctimoniousness or cant in her utterance of these words, only a childlike and implicit faith.

'Yes,' answered Naomi, with deepest gravity, 'if you win the race.'

Her more serious nature was not so easily assured. These triumphant party cries and watchwords of evangelism sometimes awakened doubts and anxieties in her reflective mind. For St. Paul such a glad burst of triumph was but the natural expression of a victorious soul; but for these followers of St. Paul, who had endured nothing, accomplished nothing—who had fought no battle, won no victory—from them this bold assurance of felicity seemed arrogant to the verge of blasphemy.

'And you will try to love me a little?' said Cynthia pleadingly.

'I shall love you very much, for my father's sake, if you make his life happy.'

'I shall honour and obey him, and wait upon him like his servant if he will let me,' answered Cynthia. 'And may I call you Naomi?'

'Yes, Cynthia.'

And from that moment they spoke to each other as Cynthia and Naomi. There was no question of the word mother; but in Naomi's manner to her stepmother there was from the first a touch of

motherliness, a protecting kindness, which was in a manner the reversal of their positions.

The wife's weaker nature, clinging, dependent, childlike in its exquisite womanliness, leaned on the firmer and more masculine character of the daughter.

'I thought you were never coming,' said Joshua, when they went down to the parlour, where the tea-table had assumed a positively splendid appearance, lighted by wax-candles, such as were supplied at three-and-sixpence a pound to Mr. Haggard's most aristocratic customers.

Judith sat bolt upright, with her hands folded, watching the candles burning, as a larger soul might have watched the blazing pyre which consumed the fortunes of an imperial house. There was a depth of desolation in this sacrifice of the wax-candles, a bitter irony in the setting up of these waxen tapers to do honour to that wandering beggar-girl whom Joshua had chosen for his wife.

'What have you two girls been talking about all this time?' asked Joshua, with an attempt at cheeriness; 'making friends, I hope?'

'Yes, father,' Naomi answered, with a look that was full of duty and affection; 'we have made friends. Cynthia and I are going to be sisters. It would sound foolish for me to call her mother, for she is two years younger than I am, and looks younger than she is.'

'Very well, my dear. You shall be sisters, then. I care not what name you give the bond, so that you love each other. And now, Judith, the tea.'

Miss Haggard had placed herself at a corner of the table remote from her accustomed seat in front of the tea-tray. There she sat rigid, impenetrable. She did not frown; no sour expression of visage betrayed her discontent. She had composed her features to a sublime self-abnegation—a resignation of all active share in the life passing around her. She looked what she had called herself in her late discourse with Sally—a cipher.

'O, dear no,' she exclaimed; 'I couldn't think of such a thing. I have done with the teapot. Mrs. Haggard will pour out the tea of course; it's her place.'

'O, please don't make any difference on my

account,' cried Cynthia, with a timidly beseeching glance at that stony countenance. 'I have never been accustomed to pour out the tea. I should feel quite awkward, unless Joshua wished it,' with a little look at her husband, which plainly said, His lightest wish is my law.

'I desire nothing that can cause discomfort or ill-will in this household,' answered Joshua. 'All I wish is that we may live happily together, in perfect peace and union. Pour out the tea, Judith, and let there be no senseless fuss about trifles.'

'I'm not one to make a fuss about nothing,' replied Judith, with dignity. 'But it's just as well to put things on a proper footing at once. It saves misunderstanding afterwards.'

And with this protest she assumed her accustomed position, which she never afterwards offered to resign.

Cynthia took the chair nearest her husband, nestling to his side, and looking up at him with bright glances of admiration and regard as he talked about home affairs with his daughter.

Jim came home by and by, full of importance,

and was presented to his father's wife. The surprise was startling for him as well as for the rest, but he received the blow much more coolly than his aunt and sister. His brain, sharpened by a course of wholesale and retail grocery, took in the material aspects of this change in his family circumstances, rather than that spiritual side of things which had troubled Naomi. He did not think regretfully of his father's second marriage as a foolish and undignified act in a grave career; but he began to wonder what effect this union might exercise upon his own prospects.

'As long as father gives me the business, I'm content,' he told himself. 'And my stepmother looks a pretty foolish thing, that wouldn't be likely to make one's life unpleasant. I hope she'll take the reins out of aunt Judith's hands, and let us have puddens every day.'

It was not till after prayers that Naomi left off expecting Oswald, who rarely let an evening pass without coming in, were it but for half an hour. But on this particular evening the Squire had taken it into his head to be prosy, and kept his son at

home, talking politics by the wood fire in the dining-room, while the autumn wind sighed and moaned in the wide old chimney.

'I wonder what Oswald will think of father's marriage?' was Naomi's chief thought that evening.

CHAPTER IV.

'I LEAN UPON THEE, DEAR, WITHOUT ALARM.'

Naomi awoke with a strange feeling of trouble on the morning after her father's return with his young wife. She felt like one who, after some sudden bereavement, awakens to the old familiar world to find it desolate and empty.

'I have lost my father,' came like a cry of despair from her troubled heart; and then came Reason, the calm and quiet teacher, and sat down by her bed, and argued the matter to its logical issue, and showed her that her father had done her no wrong. She blushed at the thought of her own selfishness—she to grudge her father this new happiness—she who had given so much of her heart to another—she who was so soon to abandon the home-nest.

'But my father has always been first, my father

will always be first, in my heart,' she said to herself excusingly.

'Let her only make my father happy, and I shall be satisfied,' she thought, as she stood before the little looking-glass, twisting the heavy coil of hair round her neat tortoise-shell comb. 'I wish she were only a little older. She has such a childish look. I cannot fancy her a companion for my father.'

Naomi went down-stairs with a determination to be very kind to the poor little wife—to shield her, if need were, from aunt Judith's acrimony; but on this first morning aunt Judith was scrupulously civil; if she erred at all it was on the side of over-politeness. She was inclined to be righteous over-much in her dealings with the new member of the household.

Jim greeted his stepmother with frank familiarity, and offered to take her for a nutting expedition in the woods after dinner.

'Of course you're fond of nuts?' he said.

'I'm very fond of the woods,' answered Cynthia, whose heart overflowed with kindly feeling for these

stepchildren, and who was grateful for the smallest token of regard on their part.

'I should like to know how the business is to go on if you're out nutting every afternoon,' said Judith, turning sharply on her nephew. She was not going to waste civility on him.

'Come, now, I've been sticking pretty close to the shop for the last six months. I don't often play truant, I'm sure, and there's not much doing in my line between dinner and tea.'

'Of course, if Mrs. Haggard wishes you to go out walking—'

'Call me Cynthia, please,' cried the girl, and then added timidly, 'unless you would like to call me sister.'

'You're very kind, but I couldn't turn my tongue to it. I never had a sister, and I can't bring myself to make believe. As to calling you by your Christian name, I should feel myself wanting in respect to my brother's wife; and nobody shall ever have cause to lay that at my door.'

'I shall call you Cynthia, though,' said Jim. 'It would never do for a great hobbledehoy like me

to be calling a pretty little thing like you mother. Folks would split their sides with laughing. And you'll come nutting this afternoon? There's hazel and cobnuts, and no end, in Matcherly Wood. It's three miles from here; but you can walk that much, I daresay.'

'I am a pretty good walker,' answered Cynthia, delighted to be on such good terms with her step-son.

'Shall I wash the tea-things?' she asked, when breakfast was over and Joshua had gone out.

'I've washed 'em for the last four-and-twenty years, and I shouldn't like harm to come to them,' answered Judith politely; 'you needn't trouble about it, Mrs. Haggard. All you've got to do is to amuse yourself; you're the mistress here, and it's your place to be waited on.'

'But, indeed, Miss Haggard, I have never been accustomed—' protested Cynthia.

'What you may have been accustomed to has nothing to do with it,' replied Judith. 'You are my brother's wife, and you shall be treated as such. There's the best parlour, when you like to sit by

yourself. *We* haven't used it on workadays; but, of course, that's no reason why you shouldn't.'

'I had rather sit in the room you use,' said Cynthia, oppressed by so much courtesy; 'I should be very sorry to cause any trouble or alteration in your life.'

Naomi was somewhat restless in her goings in and out, and up and down stairs, between breakfast and dinner, on this particular morning, having an idea that, as Oswald had not paid her his accustomed visit yesterday, he was likely to come early to-day; and she was anxious to be the first to tell him of the startling change that had taken place in the household, to soften the edge of his resentment should he be inclined to resent this act of her father's. She had not quite realised the fact that no one had any right to question Joshua's disposal of his own life.

There were the usual morning tasks: a batch of starched curtains to be ironed on the board in front of the kitchen window — the best parlour to be dusted and beeswaxed—flowers to be trimmed and watered. But throughout her performance of these

duties Naomi was listening or watching for Oswald's coming. Dinner-time came, however, and no Oswald.

Joshua went out directly after dinner, and Judith retired to her stronghold behind the counter. Cynthia and Jim started for their walk to Matcherly Wood, and Naomi was standing at the parlour window, in her afternoon dress, in that quiet hour of the declining day when the sky takes a golden tinge above distant woods. She had been watching some time, when she saw her lover coming round the bend of the road, walking slowly till he caught sight of her, and then quickening his pace, and approaching her with a smile. She went out to the garden gate to meet him, and they went to the garden together, instead of going into the dull old house. They greeted each other with the tranquil affection of lovers whose future happiness is secure, whose present bliss is undisturbed by outward influences or inward doubts.

'Why didn't you come yesterday evening, Oswald?'

'Because my father took it into his head to be

unusually conversational, and I did not like to leave him without a listener. I thought I could make amends for last night's self-denial by coming to tempt you out for a morning ramble in the woods; but this morning the Squire discovered that he was not well enough to keep an appointment with his tenant at Chale, and sent me off to represent him; so after a ten-mile ride upon Herne I had to walk about a farm all the morning, hearing complaints and excuses, and inspecting improvements of whose nature or advantage I had only the vaguest idea, yet about which I knew I should have to stand a rasping cross-examination on my return.'

'Poor Oswald!'

'I'm afraid I never was made to grow rich out of the soil, Naomi. And did you really miss me, dearest? That would be a wonderful admission from you. You don't often gratify my self-esteem by letting me think myself necessary to your happiness.'

'Oswald!' she said, with a tender reproachfulness in the serious eyes, which meant much more than words.

'You would have me believe that love's best language is silence,' he answered playfully; 'but I sometimes wish you were just a little more given to sweet words.'

'There are some feelings that are too sacred to be spoken of lightly. If it should please Heaven to put my affection to the test, you would not find it wanting.'

'I believe that, dear. I have a measureless faith in your truth and constancy, only I am exacting enough to sigh for a little more warmth as well. There are moments in which I have asked myself, Is this love, or only a sublimated friendship? We have schooled ourselves to such perfect tranquillity; we have so stifled all the agitations and emotions which poets depict as love's necessary adjuncts—nay, love's very atmosphere—that I have found myself asking, Is it really love? or is it some calmer, softer, holier feeling, such as the saints of old felt for each other; a sentiment which might be breathed through a convent grating, or communicated by martyr to martyr in a pitying sigh on the pathway to the stake?'

'I don't know whether my love is like the love

your poets write about, Oswald—that Court poet, for instance, who was in love with Amoret and Sacharissa at the same time—but I know that if my life were weighed against it, love would conquer life.'

'My dearest,' cried Oswald tenderly, drawing her to him, 'I will never say these foolish things again. Yours is the true love, yours are the depth and steadfastness; and I am a shallow wretch who cannot properly understand any feeling that does not gush forth in a torrent of words. Darling, I will trust you, and believe implicitly in the love that is not loud.'

They had come to the end of the garden, and to that green oasis of grass plot where there were a bench and table under the shade of trees whose leaves were now fast falling, or hanging limp and yellow on the dark brown branches. It was one of those still autumnal afternoons on which the earth seems to rest in a dreamy silence, as if wearied by summer's long pageant. Her corn is garnered, her fruits are stored, she has done her work, this faithful Mother Earth, and she folds her hands in the soft

September atmosphere and composes herself for winter's long sleep.

'My Naomi, how grave you are!' said Oswald when they had strolled to the wilderness without a word on either side.

'I have something to tell you, Oswald,' she answered, looking at him anxiously.

'Nothing bad, I hope. No postponement of our marriage?'

'No. It is something about my father, something that will surprise you very much—perhaps shock you.'

Oswald was puzzled. He had been taught to consider Joshua Haggard a rich man—a man who made money fast and spent it slowly; but Naomi's words and manner suggested trouble of some kind, and he could only imagine financial difficulty.

'You mean that your father's business is not so profitable as we believe,' he said; 'he has some apprehension of failure?'

'It is nothing about business. My father has married again, Oswald. He brought his wife home to us yesterday evening.'

Oswald gave a long sigh of astonishment.

'That is a surprise! But as long as it does not make you unhappy, darling, and I don't see why it should, as you'll soon be out of a stepmother's power, it can't make any difference to me. Who is the lady? Is she very grim and awful?'

'She is very pretty, and younger than I.'

'You don't mean it?'

'I hope you won't despise my father, Oswald?' said Naomi deprecatingly.

'Despise him for marrying a pretty young woman instead of an ugly old one! No, my dear, I am not so inhuman. The fact is sudden enough to be startling, but it is not unnatural. And a pretty girl will hardly be a gorgon as a stepmother. You are not very much afraid of her, are you, Naomi?'

'Poor child! I think she is more inclined to be afraid of me. It is such a relief to have told you, Oswald. You will not think any the worse of my father, will you, dear?'

'Think worse of him for being human enough to fall in love. No, Naomi; I am too deeply entangled in the meshes myself not to have a fellow-

feeling for another prisoner in the net. And for a man of your father's age, love is a very serious business. Cupid has a stronger grip upon sober manhood than on shallow and frivolous youth. Tell me all about it, dear. Who is the lady? Young, you say, and pretty? Do I know her? Have I ever seen her? Is she one of your Bethelites?'

'No, Oswald; she's quite a stranger. She was never at Combhaven till yesterday evening.'

'And do you know nothing about her?'

Naomi was silent. Here was a divided duty. Oswald, as her future husband, had a right to possess her confidence; yet loyalty to her father demanded that she should keep the secret of his wife's lowly origin; and she had some sense of personal shame in the idea that her father's wife had been one little year ago a houseless wanderer upon the country side, without name or friends—a waif, whose only history was of starvation and ill-usage.

'Is she vulgar, or disagreeable in any way?' asked Oswald, taking Naomi's silence as an evidence of embarrassment, and picturing to himself some

miller's blowsy-cheeked daughter, or worse, perhaps, the vivacious handmaid of some roadside inn.

'No; she is gentle and quiet. I do not think you will dislike her. I only feared that you might think my father foolish for having chosen such a young wife.'

The church-clock struck five, the inevitable tea-time; and Naomi turned to leave the wilderness, where the patriarchal ferns were already brown and yellow, while younger varieties still retained their tender green.

They went back to the house by the long straight pathway between the borders of rose-bushes and old-fashioned autumn flowers, which bounded the neat expanse of vegetables in carefully kept rows; the celery-bed, which already breathed forth its aromatic odour; the dark leaves of beet-root, and straggling winter kail. Oswald felt a mild curiosity about the preacher's new wife. He was slightly amused at this revelation of human weakness in the reserved and dignified Joshua, a man who had seemed to occupy a higher stage of life than that on which human weaknesses have sway. He followed

Naomi into the house, and stood close behind her as she opened the parlour-door, and, looking over her shoulder, saw Joshua's wife.

Cynthia was kneeling by the newly-lighted fire, with her straw bonnet hanging over her arm, just as she had come in from the nutting expedition; her loosened hair falling a little over her face, her cheeks flushed to a delicate carnation by air and exercise, her eyes looking dreamily at the bright flames leaping up from the newly-kindled wood; a pretty picture assuredly, concentrating all the light in the dusky room. The tea-things were laid, but the family had not yet assembled. Cynthia was alone.

She started up as Naomi entered with her lover, and stood before them shyly, too much abashed by a stranger's presence for speech.

'I hope you enjoyed your ramble,' said Naomi kindly.

'The wood was lovely. It was very kind of your brother to take me there.'

'I think it was kind of you to go with him. This is Mr. Pentreath. I—I have told him about my father's marriage.'

Cynthia curtsied, and Oswald held out his hand, at which she gave him hers shyly, never having shaken hands with any one so different from the young men of Penmoyle, whose hands were always red and inclined to coarseness, and who breathed hard in society. She was not awed or impressed by Oswald's appearance, as she had been by Joshua Haggard's dark and earnest face, but she considered him highly ornamental. Oswald was surprised by this delicate and flower-like beauty. He had expected to see a pretty young woman, buxom and good-tempered, with rosy cheeks adorned by large bunches of curls, not innocent of bergamot-scented pomatum, coral earrings, perhaps, and one of those velvet headbands which he so heartily detested—the kind of young woman he had seen in a tobacconist's shop at Exeter.

He looked at Cynthia silently, lost in wonder. Where could Joshua Haggard have discovered this gracious creature? It was as if he had come unawares into that homely parlour and found Milton's Sabrina or Ovid's Daphne standing by the hearth.

Mr. Haggard came in presently, followed by his

sister. He gave his wife a little look of greeting which was full of quiet tenderness, and then welcomed his future son-in-law with a hearty shake-hands.

'You see I have stolen a march upon you all, Oswald,' he said. 'At my age a man does not care to make a fuss about getting married; and I knew that Naomi and you would give my wife an affectionate welcome. I had no occasion to stipulate for that beforehand.'

Cynthia had slipped away to carry her bonnet up-stairs. She had been too well trained by the Miss Weblings not to know that a bonnet flung carelessly on a chair in the family sitting-room would be an offence to aunt Judith. She came back breathless, with her hair neatly arranged, and took her seat by her husband's side, but not before Miss Haggard had exclaimed,

'When ever are we going to sit down to tea, I wonder? It's a quarter-past already. I don't know what's come to the house.'

CHAPTER V.

'TROP BELLE POUR MOI, VOILÀ MON TRÉPAS.'

THE actual machinery of life, the common details of domestic existence, underwent little change after Joshua Haggard's second marriage, and the introduction of a fair girl-wife into the sober household. The change was in the minds of the household, not in outward things. Aunt Judith abated no jot or tittle of her authority. Her assumption of her accustomed post at the tea-table upon the evening of Cynthia's arrival was symbolical of her maintenance of supreme authority in all domestic matters. She did not even offer to surrender the keys of those awful and impenetrable repositories in which she kept the jams and jellies, the pickles and home-made wines, and all those items which, in Jim's opinion, gave savour and relish to life—the ornamental margin of existence's daily needs, like the labyrinthine scroll-work and illumination which

border the text in a mediæval Bible. She retained supreme authority in the kitchen; and this young wife's coming did not benefit her stepson by so much as an extra pudding on weekdays, or a currant cake flavoured with saffron, and of that golden hue his soul loved, on Sundays.

Before Cynthia had been established in her new home for the space of a week she had discovered that her domestic duties and rights were alike usurped by another, that in yielding the teapot she had given up her place in her husband's home. This was a disappointment; for in her happy dreams of life with Joshua she had seen herself ministering to him, providing for his comforts, working with those busy clever hands of hers for his small needs and simple luxuries, lending new graces and pleasures to his daily life, were they but the smallest things, such as a bunch of fresh flowers on his breakfast-table, or a dish of light cakes at tea-time. She had a natural taste for and love of household work—a handiness in all womanly offices which had won her the approval of her mistresses at Penmoyle; and to be shut out of these offices was a hardship she felt keenly.

Not one word of complaint was ever spoken by her, or Joshua would have promptly transferred the domestic sceptre. She was by nature submissive, and the experience of her brief life had made obedience a habit. She bowed her neck to Judith's yoke, and resigned her simple household privileges without a murmur. Joshua thought it right, no doubt, or he would not look on approvingly. She did not know that Joshua—whose temporal and spiritual duties filled his time and thoughts to overflowing—had never thought about the matter at all. She remembered what he had said on that first evening—'Let there be peace in the household, and no foolish fuss about trifles;' and she accepted this speech as a command. Any opposition to aunt Judith would be rebellion against her husband.

Cynthia's position in the family, therefore, seemed rather that of daughter than wife. She sat by her husband's side at meals; she spent her mornings in needlework, and her afternoons in serious reading, or occasionally in a ramble on the sea-shore or in the woods with Jim. She would have been better pleased to accompany her husband on his pastoral visits to

distant homesteads and cottages, but Joshua told her gently that her presence would be out of place on such occasions. She taught in Mr. Haggard's Sunday-school, held in a roomy loft at the top of the chapel. She often went to read to the sick and aged among her husband's flock, delighted to be of some use in this manner; but these occupations left a wide margin of her life to be filled somehow; and there were afternoon hours in which she sat with the Bible or Baxter open before her, and her thoughts wandering far from the text.

There were some sad thoughts mingled with her full contentment in an union which had seemed to her royal and triumphant as Esther's bridal with Ahasuerus. She had been quick to perceive the consternation her appearance had occasioned on that first evening; and she was conscious that beneath Judith's cold civility and somewhat exaggerated politeness there lurked a disapproving spirit that was not to be conciliated. Let her be never so assiduous to please her husband's sister, Judith would never love her; and, more than this, Judith had contrived to let her know, without any apparent

unkindness of intention, that Joshua's marriage had lowered him in the esteem of his flock.

'We can't all be apostles and martyrs,' said Judith; 'but folks expected a great deal of my brother. "He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord," and he that's married doesn't. St. Paul says that pretty plain, you see; there's no getting away from the right meaning of his words. And people will naturally cast that up at my brother—marrying a second time, and a girl younger than his daughter. I don't blame you, my dear. I daresay if you'd thought of these things you'd have said no, especially as your own inclination would have led you to prefer a younger man.'

'I could never have loved or honoured any one as I love and honour my husband,' protested Cynthia, flushing with anger at the suggestion.

'Ah,' sighed Judith, with a world of significance, 'of course it was a great thing for you to come to such a home as this, and a husband as comfortably off as my brother. It isn't many young women in service that get as well provided for.'

'I hope you don't think—' cried Cynthia eagerly.

'I trust I'm too much of a Christian to think evil of any one,' replied aunt Judith, with dignity. 'I'm thinking what *other* people will say. You can't stop their tongues. If they choose to say that my brother Joshua was led away from his own principles and the First of Corinthians by a pretty face, and that you married him for the sake of a home, there's no law in the land to hinder 'em from having their say.'

Thus for the first time in her life Cynthia heard of that invisible and irresponsible tribunal which is always sitting outside our doors; and was taught to feel that it was not to her Creator and her own conscience alone she had to answer, but that she ought also to shape her acts to meet the views of other people; other people would measure her conduct by their standard, sound the depths of her heart with their plummet; and unheard, undefended, ignorant alike of her indictment and her sentence, she would be convicted and condemned.

This was a chilling revelation to one as innocent of life's complexities as Miranda or Perdita. One of the few lessons in the world's bitter school which

Cynthia had thoroughly learned was to endure undeserved affliction patiently. She bore aunt Judith's sharp stings and quiet stabs as meekly as she had borne ill-usage from the tyrants of her childhood. But she felt her punishment none the less keenly; and already, ere she had been married a month, began to ask herself if Joshua had verily done wisely in marrying her, and whether it would not have been better for her to have gone on worshipping him at a distance all her life, spending her tranquil industrious days in the little kitchen at Penmoyle, doing her duty, and being praised for faithful service, among people who were in no wise scandalised by her existence. It had been a very monotonous life, containing little for memory to dwell on, offering still less for hope to build upon; and the river of life, which youth would fain sail upon, is a bright and swiftly flowing current—not a tideless canal. But it had been a life full of peace, and already in this new life there had come a feeling which was not peace. Unhappily Judith's Christianlike and candid remarks upon popular feeling at Combhaven were sustained by a foundation of truth. The minister's

congregation did not contemplate his second marriage with entire approval. They were not prepared to take his youthful flaxen-haired wife to their hearths and bosoms with any warmth of affection. She would be invited out to tea, of course, and best teapots would be taken out of their chamois-leather enfoldings, and amber-hued cakes would be baked for her regalement; but there would be little heartiness in her reception—it would be ceremonial and civic only, like the welcome of a foreign princess when the nation feels their prince has made a foolish or insignificant choice.

There were so many things to be said against this marriage of Joshua Haggard's. In the first place, why marry at all? In the second, if he must needs marry, why not choose one of his own flock—a comfortable widow, for instance—and there were several comfortable widows among the Bethelites—whose antecedents would be patent to everybody at Combhaven, whose life from the cradle upwards would be as well known to the community as the pattern of her parlour carpet, or the furniture in her best bedroom? Such a marriage, though unspi-

ritual, and, in somewise, depoetising the ideal pastor, would at least have recommended itself to the more practical members of the congregation as prudent and suitable.

Whatever disappointment such a marriage might have caused in those loftier minds which had elevated the preacher and teacher into the Saint and Apostle—minds to be found chiefly among the spinsters of Joshua's flock—it could hardly have occasioned scandal; but this unannounced, unexplained union with an unknown young woman from the far West of Cornwall—a girl who had worked in the mines, perhaps, and worn unholy attire, and toiled shoulder-to-shoulder with rough barbarians, speaking a strange tongue—this was enough to inspire unpleasant doubts in the minds of Joshua's congregation, to call all their prejudices to arms against the fair intruder.

Who was she—supposing that she had not worked in the mines? Who was she? whence came she? to whom belonged she?—questions to which no one could supply any categorical or satisfactory answer, though speculative answers and suggestions were to

be had in abundance. Whence came this wandering rumour, traceable to no particular source, yet in everybody's mouth, that Joshua had found his young wife by the wayside, a beggar, with bare feet, houseless, friendless, not even knowing the name of her kindred, or the place of her birth, nor on what parish she might fasten her helplessness; the mearest waif upon the stream of life? This notion could hardly have arisen from any imprudent communicativeness upon the part of aunt Judith, for, when sounded by solicitous friends upon the subject of her brother's marriage, that lady had refrained from all expression of opinion save such dumb, inscrutable movements as shoulder-shrugs, elevation of the eyebrows, lips tightly drawn, and head shaken with a solemn significance. Whatever this dumbshow meant, Combhaven felt assured that it meant a great deal, and meant no good.

There was a general and growing conviction that Joshua had acted foolishly, if not wickedly, in marrying this strange young woman. 'How are the mighty fallen!' cried the Bethelites; and in their lamentations over the degradation of their pastor,

they indulged in a great deal of Scriptural language to his disadvantage. Perhaps the value of our Bible never comes so fully home to us as when we quote it against our erring neighbour. It was felt that Joshua held the same position in Combhaven that David must have occupied in Jerusalem after that lamentable episode in the princely life which brought greatness to the level of the sinful herd. The preacher read disapproval in the faces of his flock on the first Sabbath after his marriage; he discovered a coldness, an alteration in the tone of those customers at the shop who were of his congregation. His Church of England patrons, on the contrary, congratulated him heartily upon his marriage, and praised his wife's pretty face in the friendliest manner. But they had never canonised the pastor; they contemplated him solely in his aspect as a general dealer; and what more natural, what more distinctly human, than that a well-to-do grocer should beautify the autumn of his life with the charms and graces of a young wife?

Joshua saw the change in his flock, and his heart rebelled against their hardness. Pride sustained him

—a manly and honest pride, and a spiritual pride, which told him that he was better than the best of those who presumed to sit in judgment upon him. Who among them had toiled for the good cause as he had done? Who, among these professing Methodists, had trodden in the footsteps of the great founder of Methodism as he had trodden, faithfully imitating that pious man's asceticism and self-denial? And were these people, whom he had served so faithfully, for whose spiritual welfare he had laboured so hard, to turn the light that he had kindled against him, to distort the law he had taught them, in order to pass an iniquitous sentence upon their teacher? He felt these cold looks and altered greetings keenly as a deep injustice, and shut himself up in the armour of offended pride. God had given him this infinite blessing—the love of a pure and lovely woman—and was man's malice to poison his cup of bliss? No, he told himself. He could live without the world's regard. He had never served mankind for their own sake, and he could dispense with their affection. In his prayers and sermons at this time of estrangement he raised himself so far

above the level of daily life and earthly ills, that there was no taint of personal feeling to be perceived in any of his words, no murmur against man's injustice crept into his communion with God. Never had his teaching been clearer or more elevated; never were his prayers more fervent. Into that spiritual world of which he possessed the key neither worldly malice nor worldly misconception could follow him.

Again, at the worst, were his flock never so ungrateful, he knew of one listener whose mute enthusiasm was in itself sufficient for inspiration. If he had not been able, of his own unassisted strength, to lift up his soul to the very gates of heaven, that look of Cynthia's, as she sat in the narrow little pew just under the square box of a pulpit, would have been the source of pure imaginings and holy thoughts. His Sabbaths were now such blessed days; for all the time he did not owe to duty he gave to his young wife. They walked together by that lovely sea which in its jewel-like colouring so often recalled the Oriental imagery of Holy Writ. They talked together of spiritual things, with a fond

familiarity which is natural to those whose only poetry, whose only knowledge of the beautiful, has been drawn from Scripture. Cynthia's greatest delight at this time was to hear her husband talk of his youthful career, his discouragements and successes, his alternate despair and triumph; those hysterical gusts of enthusiasm in the newly-converted which had promised so much, those chilling disappointments caused by backsliding in his brightest disciples, the sudden going out of the sacred fire.

Perfectly blessed in such perfect love, Joshua was able to live his own life with supreme indifference as to the opinion of the outside world; and this independence of feeling speedily revealing itself to the flock, there was a general sense of disappointment at the discovery that Mr. Haggard had not been crushed by their disapproval, and then the cold looks began to give place to friendly smiles and salutations, as of old. The pastor was complimented on his last sermon; the more select of the community were pressing in their invitations to tea-parties of a ceremonious character.

Joshua, who had felt his affections outraged, was

not so easily to be won back to the pleasant path of brotherly love. He rejected all invitations to tea, responded coldly to the warmest salutations, and heard men's praises of his eloquence unmoved. But in all pastoral duties he was faithful, as of old; ministered to the sick, taught in his school, gave three evenings a week to a class of young men belonging to the labouring community, who met in the loft over the chapel for serious reading and conversation by the light of two dip candles, and joined in a hymn before they separated. It may be supposed, therefore, that, with the exception of those tranquil Sabbath hours between the services, there was not much time left for him to devote to his young wife, and that Cynthia had plenty of leisure in which to meditate upon things spiritual and temporal.

CHAPTER VI.

A FAMILY PICTURE.

THE year drew to its close, and society at Combhaven, which possessed something of that capacity for adapting itself to circumstances which is characteristic of society in wider circles, had got accustomed to the idea of Joshua Haggard's marriage; and, if not altogether reconciled to his union, had become, at any rate, resigned to the inevitable.

'It's a blessed mercy for Mr. Haggard that he's got a sister to look after his house and keep the furniture polished, and see that the bottoms of the loaves and broken pieces don't get thrown to the fowls,' remarked careful housewives to each other in the friendly loquacity of the tea-table, 'or else things would go to wrack and ruin altogether, I should think, with a young wife like that.'

'And so pretty, too,' sighed a matron, gently

shaking the stiffest of caps, as if prettiness were a crime.

'Pretty and useless, no doubt, poor thing. And he seems so foolishly fond of her. I'm sure to see them out walking together you'd think they were sweethearts that had only just begun to keep company,' remarked Mrs. Pycroft, of the First and Last, whose conversations with her husband after marriage had been chiefly of a didactic or argumentative character.

Once, and once only, had Joshua—whose style of preaching was more personal and familiar than that which obtained at this time in the Established Church, where the chaff of abstruse doctrine was but sparsely qualified with the grain of moral teaching and Gospel truth—approached indirectly the subject of his marriage.

He had been quoting Richard Baxter's *Call to the Unconverted*, and, suddenly diverging from the theology of the preacher, enlarged upon the man and his life.

'It was in many ways a life of trial, yet in all ways a life full of blessing,' he said; 'nor do I count

it the smallest of graces which Providence bestowed upon this great and good man that, at forty-seven years of age, he was blessed in the affection of a wife of three-and-twenty. He had come to that time of life without having ever known the sweetness of domestic happiness. But it pleased God that he should be the instrument of this dear girl's conversion, and that her heart should go forth to him who had brought her the message of salvation. There were some, perchance, in those evil days who were scandalised by this marriage; for it had been a part of Baxter's creed that for ministers to marry was barely lawful. But Heaven smiled upon this wedded pair, who were verily married in the Lord; and Baxter has told us that he found in his wife a help-meet, a comforter in all his sorrows, the sharer of his prison, and always the helper to his joy.'

Before the year was ended Naomi had become completely reconciled to her father's marriage. She had suffered faint thrills of pain just at first, when she saw Cynthia draw her chair near Joshua's, and perhaps sit with her hand in his, while he read the evening Scriptures. She had felt it just a little hard

to see her father's eyes rest with such ineffable love upon the face of the stranger; but she had schooled her heart to submit to this loss—if loss it could be called—since her father was more affectionate to his children than he had been before his marriage. She had subdued all human jealousy, and had taught herself to be glad that her father had won so fair and faithful a companion. There was something indescribably touching in the young wife's childlike affection for her husband, her intense belief in him, her unbounded admiration for his talents and powers as preacher and teacher, her implicit faith in his judgment. If flattery be a pleasant poison, Joshua was in a fair way to be poisoned by the sweetest of all flatteries—the exaggerated estimate which springs from womanly love. Love with a woman of this temper is but another name for worship; and Cynthia's love had begun in a spiritual idolatry which had set Joshua but a little way below the saints and apostles he had taught her to reverence. In a man so truthful as Joshua closer communion revealed no flaw, familiarity was not followed by disillusion. After two months of married life the husband still

occupied the pedestal upon which Cynthia had elevated the teacher; but, although she had suffered no disappointment in the man himself, her vivid and romantic mind began to find something wanting in his surroundings. The atmosphere of her daily life was depressing; the young eager spirit yearned for work of some kind, and was flung back upon the dull blank of idleness. She sighed for keener air, a wider horizon, yet scarcely knew what she desired. She had secret aspirations for her husband, and rebelled against that commonplace trade which occupied one half of his life—that buying and selling and getting gain, which seemed to her enthusiastic mind a practical denial of the Gospel which the trader preached on Sundays, the lesson which he taught his flock on weekdays. These divided duties, this solicitous service to a worldly master, struck her as out of joint with her husband's sacred character. To her, who had known no other church than this Dissenting community, and who hardly knew that they were Dissenters, Joshua was as holy as if Episcopal hands had been laid upon him, and she was troubled by the incongruity between the trader and

the priest. Yet, seeing that Joshua saw no harm in his calling, that he held honest trade as an honourable office, she dared not lift up her voice in remonstrance, and accepted the shop as one of those things which, like aunt Judith, were an inevitable element in her life.

Christmas brought cheerful thoughts and friendly relations between the minister and his flock. Presents rained upon Joshua at this season, and those stiffnecked members of his congregation who had lifted the nose at his marriage, atoned for their unfriendly feeling by the fattest of turkeys and youngest of geese. Christmas was a season of much eating and drinking at Combhaven; and even Methodism forgot to be ascetic, and gorged itself with beef and pudding, with a riotous delight in the good things of this mortal life that would have made William Law's hair stand on end. The Established Church woke up from its comfortable doze, and sang carols on Christmas-eve; the ecclesiastical feeling for colour displayed itself in sprigs of holly, stuck here and there in convenient places by the hands of beadle and pew-opener; and a dole of bread, provided by

the bequest of the virtuous dame Margery Hawker, of this parish, was meted out to five-and-twenty poor women on Christmas morning. New bonnets, modelled upon the coal-scuttle of the period, were to be seen above the high oaken pews of St. Mary Magdalene, and enlivened the crowded congregation at Little Bethel. It was altogether a season of pleasant thoughts and general contentment, a season which seemed very sweet to Naomi, as she walked in the leafless woods with the lover who was so soon to be her husband. Early in March, before the birds had pecked the crocuses to death, before the daffodils had begun their fairy dances in the windy afternoons, Naomi and Oswald were to be married at the gray old parish church. It was a wonderful thing to think of. Naomi was to be a great lady, and live at the Grange, and have that pretty morning-room, with its dainty bookcases, and neat duodecimo edition of the old poets, bound in white vellum, for her very own. She was to belong to the old Squire and his son. The gardens and the park, where the cattle browsed, and the beautiful mysterious wood, with its glades and dells and lopsided old trees, and

knolls and thickets, which one could never quite know by heart, were to be hers—a part of her life, inseparable from all her future years.

'You will let me go to chapel, Oswald?' she asked earnestly; 'you will never try to keep me away from Little Bethel?'

'My dearest, I would rather go there with you than hinder your going. You shall be free, my dear. These things are more to you than they are to me. It would be hard if I were to oppose my prejudices to your deep-rooted faith. And who shall say whether John Wesley's creed is right or wrong? It is a comfortable doctrine most assuredly that sin brings us closer to Christ, and that the deeper we sink in the mire the nearer we are to the stars.'

'O Oswald, you don't understand. It is our consciousness of sin that brings us to the Fount of grace, not the sin.'

They were very happy at this Christmastide. It was one of those green yules to which popular prejudice accredits the filling of churchyards, although the *Times* obituary goes far to prove the good old-fashioned Christmas, with his icicle diadem and his

mantle of snow, Death's sterner coadjutor. Blackbirds were merry in the woods at evensong, and mistaken dog-violets struggled into untimely bloom under the shelter of tall hedges. Oswald dined with his father upon the great festival, and, as soon as he decently could do so, stole away from the firelit dining-room, leaving the old Squire asleep in his big arm-chair, where he would in all likelihood slumber peacefully until bed-time, when he would awake with wonderful briskness to go his round of the lower chambers, and see that every bolt was duly drawn against thieves and burglars, for although half a dozen spoons and forks, and a pair of salt-cellars with corpulent bodies and attenuated legs comprised the utmost display of silver that ever decorated the Squire's table, there was a goodly store of old tankards, venison-dishes, soup-tureens, and smaller plate stowed away in the great oak closet in old Mr. Pentreath's bedroom.

Oswald walked straight to the minister's house —but not quite so fast as he had been accustomed to walk in the same direction. The air was wondrously mild; the western sky a pale primrose; the

wooded horizon-line bluer than it is wont to be. It was a winter twilight that might tempt a man to linger, and Oswald was full of thought. Early in March—so soon—for him, as for Naomi, that approaching marriage was an event to be contemplated with wonder, almost with disbelief. His apprenticeship, which at the beginning had seemed to him as long as Jacob's, was nearly ended. His patience and truth and constancy were to have their reward.

'Dear girl!' he said to himself, thinking of his betrothed. 'She is the best and noblest of women; where could I find so perfect a wife? I do not believe there is a flaw in her goodness. I always feel myself a better man when I am with her. Yes, that is what a wife ought to be.'

And then in his low legato tones he repeated that familiar verse of Wordsworth's—

'A perfect woman, nobly planned'—

from a poem which seems to concentrate in thirty lines all that can ever be said or sung in praise of womankind.

He could see the ruddy firelight shining in the minister's best parlour as he came round the bend

of the road. It was tea-time, and they were all assembled there, no doubt—aunt Judith in her best gown, which was such an excellent fit across the chest as to be faintly suggestive of a strait waistcoat; Naomi sitting in her favourite corner with the red light flickering upon her glossy hair, and those deep dark eyes of hers full of grave thoughts; and on the other side of the hearth that childlike face and figure, the very type of innocent and guileless maidenhood, Oswald's idea of Goethe's Gretchen, nestling close to Joshua's side, looking up at him now and then with worshipping eyes.

Oswald saw the family scene afar off, as if it had been a mirage-picture. He turned the handle of the door and went in. The passage was dimly lighted by an oil-lamp. He knocked at the parlour door by way of ceremony, and the minister's deep voice bade him enter. Yes, the scene was just as his imagination had shown it to him—aunt Judith seated at the tea-board, the old brown Bible at Joshua's right hand, Cynthia's fair hair looking like palest gold in the uncertain light, Naomi's dark head drooping thoughtfully, Jim screwed as close

as possible to the fire, stooping to roast chestnuts between the bars—a peaceful home-picture. They all looked up and gave him welcome, but Naomi's gratified smile was worth all the rest.

'I did not think you would be able to come,' she exclaimed.

'Luckily for me my father indulged in a heavier dinner than usual and fell asleep immediately after it. But I should have contrived to come under any circumstances. I hope I am in time for a cup of your excellent tea, Miss Haggard? It is not every one can make such tea as yours.'

'Every one hasn't been making tea in the same pot for five-and-twenty years,' replied aunt Judith, obviously mollified by this compliment. 'You want to know your pot and to know your tea if it's to be worth drinking.'

Miss Haggard dispensed the beverage with an abnormal stiffness peculiar to festive occasions and best gowns. Social gatherings of a cheerful nature did not induce aunt Judith to unbend. On occasions of this kind she assumed a spinal inflexibility which, in her mind, was the surest indication of a

virtuous bringing-up and a polite education. And this backboard politeness was accepted at Combhaven, where Miss Haggard was considered 'quite the lady.'

'I don't know what's coming to the women in this place,' said aunt Judith presently, when there was a pause in the conversation, 'but I think they must have set their hearts on spending money one against the other. I counted four new bonnets in chapel this morning, without counting Mrs. Spradgers's, that had been fresh trimmed, and she only had it in October, for I sold her the ribbon for it—a lovely maroon with an orange spot.'

'I hope you had something better to do in chapel than count the new bonnets and think badly of your neighbours, Judith,' remonstrated Joshua.

'I've got eyes in chapel as well as out of chapel,' answered Judith, 'and there's times when the most serious-minded Christian can use 'em—while the hymn's being given out, for instance; our time's our own then, I should think. All I can say is, that if milliners' made-up bonnets—drawn silk trumpery that one heavy shower will spoil—don't

bring Combhaven to ruin, nothing else will. There's Mrs. Flitton, that I've sold many a serviceable straw to in days gone by, decked out in a velvet cottage with a bird of Paradise from Barnstaple. It was luxury of this kind that led to the French king losing his head when we were young folks, Joshua. I've heard you say as much many a time, so don't deny it.'

'If you thought less of your neighbours' shortcomings, Judith—'

'I can't help thinking of them when I've got fourteen straw bonnets, best quality, left out of last summer's stock. The shape will be old next year, I daresay. Fashions change so quick nowadays. I shall have to sell 'em to the servant-girls, half-price.'

'How you do worry about a few shillings, aunt!' cried Jim, in a disgusted tone. 'We make more on our side of the shop in a day than you can lose on your side in a week.'

'Thank you, Mr. Pert. When your father loses money by *my* department I hope he'll tell me so. I haven't heard of it yet.'

'Then why do you make such a fuss about half a dozen straw bonnets? You *said* you were going to lose by 'em.'

'If I lose by my bonnets I shall come home upon my ribbons, you may be sure, Mr. James; and when you know the grocery business as well as I know the drapery, you may take me to task, not sooner.'

'We won't talk any more about the shop this evening, Judith,' said Joshua. 'We may be too assiduous in business.'

'The Bible tells us not to be slothful,' replied the aggrieved Judith; 'but I daresay it vexes Mrs. Haggard to hear such talk. She'd have liked to have married a bishop, with his carriage and pair.'

This was a hit at Cynthia's dislike to the shop, which the girl had revealed involuntarily upon one or two occasions.

'I should be glad if my husband had nothing to distract his thoughts from his chapel and his schools,' answered Cynthia. 'Any man can keep a shop. It seems a hard thing that his time should be taken up with selling grocery.'

'Does it seem a hard thing that he's got a comfortable home and money in the bank, and a fortune to give his daughter?' demanded aunt Judith. 'He wouldn't have got those out of Little Bethel.'

Cynthia sighed. She fancied it would have been far happier to have wandered with her husband from village to village, tending him and comforting him in his pilgrimage, than to lead this prosperous life in a settled home, where there was so much to draw his mind away from his great work. And was it for the sake of a substantial house and daily food, for money heaped up in the bank, that the teacher consented so to limit his sphere of usefulness—nay, in a manner to hide his light under a bushel? Naomi had talked to Cynthia of that missionary life which seemed so glorious to her, and the younger girl had caught the enthusiasm of the elder. She felt as if her husband's true vocation lay far away beyond the wide strange seas, among the races that had never heard of the Christian's God.

Happily for household peace upon this festive occasion the clearing away of the tea-things, and the retirement of Judith to wash them, put an

end to a discussion that had tended towards unpleasantness.

Naomi and Oswald were able to enjoy their quiet talk on one side of the hearth, while Joshua read one of his favourite Puritan divines on the other, Cynthia sitting by him in meek silence, full of sweet thoughts and dreamy aspirations after an unknown good. James went on roasting his chestnuts, which ever and anon exploded with a fizz and a splutter, to his own delight and the consternation of the assembly.

'How pretty she is!' whispered Oswald to Naomi, contemplating Cynthia's thoughtful face during a pause in his talk. He watched her with the same pleasure and interest he might have felt in the contemplation of a pretty child—something soft and sweet and helpless, which he looked down upon from the altitude of his mature years.

'Yes, she is very pretty and very good. My father is quite happy in his marriage.'

'Why does she never come with us in our walks? It must be dull for her of an afternoon, when your father is out.'

'She goes for a walk with Jim sometimes.'

'But why not with us?'

'I don't know. She's very shy. I rather think she's afraid of you.'

'Afraid of me! O, that's too ridiculous.'

'She thinks you a very fine gentleman.'

'That's delightful! You know how much of the fine gentleman there is about me, Naomi. I am afraid she must be rather silly.'

'O no, indeed. She is wonderfully bright and quick in everything.'

'Is she? I should hardly have thought her so. We are talking of you, Mrs. Haggard,' pursued Oswald, abandoning his confidential, half-whispering tone; 'I have been asking Naomi why you never join us in our afternoon rambles. Perhaps you don't care for woods and hills?'

'Yes I do,' answered Cynthia; 'I am very fond of this beautiful place. It is prettier than anything I ever saw before.'

'I should think so,' said aunt Judith sharply. 'It's bare enough in the mining country where you come from, I've always heard say.'

'You should come with us sometimes, Mrs. Haggard,' said Oswald.

'Yes,' said Joshua, looking up from his book. 'It would be better for you to go out of doors oftener, Cynthia. I find you sitting reading or working in the parlour every afternoon when I come home to tea.'

'There's nothing so bad as poring over a book for a young woman's spine,' said aunt Judith. 'Mrs. Haggard will be round-shouldered before she's thirty if she doesn't take care.'

Judith's backbone was her tower of strength. Years might creep on, the insidious approach of age might show itself in a sprinkling of gray hairs among the dark ones—by crow's-feet at the corners of the eyes—but Judith's spine defied the assailant Time. It straightened itself against the enemy, and at eight-and-forty Miss Haggard was more erect than she had been at eighteen.

'Yes, my love, you must really have more air and exercise,' said Joshua.

Cynthia gave a faint sigh. She was very happy, on such an evening as this, in her husband's com-

pany, sitting next him, stealing her hand into his now and then, or leaning against his shoulder to read a page or so of the book he was reading; but there were times in her life when she felt as if she belonged to no one. Thus it was that she had taken to pore over books, or to sit long at some laborious piece of plain needlework. There was so little for her to do; she was never happier than when Joshua allowed her to go and sit in some stuffy cottage, beside the bed of sickness or decrepitude, and read the Book she loved. She felt then that she too had her mission in the world, and that she was in some wise worthy of the husband who had chosen her.

Not a festive Christmas evening this for those who have been wont to associate the occasion with cheery family circles, merry children, old-fashioned games, cards, forfeits, and snapdragon—the good old traditional Christmas immortalised by Washington Irving and Charles Dickens. A pack of cards had never been seen in Mr. Haggard's house, and forfeits or snapdragon he would have accounted childish folly. His children had never been gratified with such empty delights. In the day when he took up

John Wesley as his guide and model, he put away from him all small pleasures, all sensual gratifications. At heart he was an ascetic, and it grated a little upon his sense of right to see the board loaded with cold turkey and chine and plum-pudding upon this particular evening. He would have been happier eating his dry bread and hard cheese, and feeling that he was denying himself while all the rest of the world were feasting and revelling. There was a touch of the Pharisee's spiritual pride here, perhaps; but the pride had its source in that idea of calling and special grace which was implanted in the preacher's heart. Had he not been chosen and elected in the days of his youth, when he first felt himself called to do God's work? He could name the day and hour. It was no slow awakening to solemn truths, no gradual leavening of the human mind with spiritual grace; but a sudden and absolute conversion—an instantaneous call to righteousness. Yesterday a child of wrath, to-day the heir of salvation, a citizen of heaven, an inhabitant of eternity. Wondrous, mysterious had been this Pentecostal season; he looked back at it with love and

pride. How pitiful a price had he paid for so great a treasure, in surrendering the transient pleasures of this world!

And now Heaven had rewarded him with the sweetest of all earthly blessings—the blessed joys of home.

He looked at his daughter, happy by her lover's side; at his son, healthy, intelligent, active, dutiful; at his useful sister, rough and bitter, like medicinal herbs, but a faithful servant; at his wife, dearest of all; and thanked God for these manifold blessings.

CHAPTER VII.

CYNTHIA TRIES TO BE USEFUL.

March had come; the anemones were white in the woods, the gummy chestnut-buds were bursting in sheltered corners of the land, there was a perfume of violets in the lanes, and primroses began to peep out like pale earth-stars, amidst tender green tufts fringed with the ragged disorder of last year's leaves. The gaudy daffodils were flaunting everywhere. March was growing old, but Naomi Haggard's wedding had not yet come to pass. The date had been fixed, and all things had gone prosperously till within a week of the appointed day, when the Squire, returning on horseback from Barnstaple, where he had been to take counsel with his lawyer as to the ejectment of a troublesome tenant, had been overtaken by a heavy fall of rain, which lasted with a cruel persistency throughout his homeward journey. Instead of immediately resorting to a hot bath and dry

clothes as a cure, Mr. Pentreath had sat by the dining-room fire, while he solaced himself with a tumbler of hot brandy-and-water, before changing his raiment. The consequences of the wet ride and of his imprudence showed themselves next morning in a sharp attack of bronchitis, which speedily degenerated into inflammation of the lungs. Before the week was out the Squire's life was in danger, and Naomi's wedding was deferred to an indefinite period.

Oswald was in much distress about his father's state. They had not loved each other tenderly, but the son was soft-hearted, and felt a curious aching pity for the lonely old man lying on his deathbed, more friendless than the lowliest hind on his estate. The family surgeon and sole doctor of Combhaven, who attended all the families round about, and killed or cured by the Pharmacopœia without let or hindrance from any opposing practitioner, declared that the Squire's only chance of recovering lay not in medicine, or blood-letting, or blistering, but in good nursing. And who was to nurse this peevish, cantankerous old man, who, while groaning in the

agonies of mortal disease, would grudge the nurse her food and feel an extra pang at every meal she ate? The professional nurses of Combhaven were ancient females of the sibyl or witch type, women one might expect to meet on solitary moors, or in fever-haunted swamps, gathering simples under a stormy moon, and whose ignorance was only matched in degree by their cunning and cruelty. The housemaid at the Grange, who had such a conscientious regard for the oak panelling that she would begin beeswaxing at six o'clock in the morning, was not so deeply attached to her old master. When Oswald appealed to her for aid she told him she had never been where there was sickness, and did not know much about invalids' ways, and that she should scream if any one asked her to handle a leech. The housekeeper was old and purblind, and cooked her dinners by the aid of habit and memory rather than by any existing sense. Oswald could not trust his father's life to her.

In this difficulty he naturally applied to Miss Haggard as a person likely to have all the resources of Combhaven at her fingers' ends.

'Do I know any woman that would go out sick-nursing?' she exclaimed, repeating Oswald's question. 'If I know one such I know twenty. There's nothing people won't undertake to do if you'll pay them for it. But if you ask me to recommend you a nurse for your father, Mr. Pentreath, that's quite another thing. There isn't a woman who goes out nursing in Combhaven that I'd trust with the life of a kitten, if I wanted the kitten to grow up to a cat.'

'That's conclusive,' said Oswald despondently. 'Yet I suppose people in Combhaven get nursed somehow when they're ill.'

'Somehow; yes, that's about it. Sometimes they die, and sometimes Providence is extra kind to them, and pulls them through their troubles, nursing and all.'

This was depressing. Oswald sat looking at the fire gloomily, wondering what he ought to do. It was tea-time. Aunt Judith was in her accustomed place before the tea-tray. Naomi stood by the mantelpiece looking at her lover, too much disturbed by his despondency to obey that rigorous code of eti-

quette which her aunt had imposed upon the household, and in which sitting down to meals the instant they were ready was a stringent article. Cynthia had taken her place and was cutting bread-and-butter for Jim, with a calm matronly air which became her fair young face. She was always pleased to be useful, were it in the smallest detail.

'I wish I could nurse your father, Oswald,' said Naomi earnestly.

'But you can't,' exclaimed Judith with prompt severity. 'A pretty thing indeed for you to go and live in the Squire's house before you've any right. A nice scandal there'd be in Combhaven. You a minister's daughter too! You ought to have more sense than to talk of such a thing.'

'I can't see that it would be wrong,' cried Oswald, with some show of heat. 'Who has a better right to be at home in my father's house than my future wife?'

'If young men like you were able to draw a line between right and wrong, right and wrong wouldn't get mixed up so often as they do,' replied Judith sententiously. 'As to Naomi making herself at home

at the Grange till she's Mrs. Pentreath, it's out of the question, and she ought to have known it. Besides which, she knows about as much of sick-nursing as a baby in its cradle.'

'God would teach me,' said Naomi, 'and my love for Oswald would make me strong to help his father.'

'I believe that, Naomi,' exclaimed Oswald, with a grateful look.

'Let me nurse the Squire,' said Cynthia, with a subdued eagerness. 'I have so little to do at home, I should hardly be missed. And I do know something about sickness. I nursed Miss Webling, a lady who had the quinsy very badly. The doctor thought she would die; and I put on leeches and blisters, and sat up with her fifteen nights. And I have nursed the poor people here, haven't I, Joshua?' she asked, looking up at her husband, who had this moment entered the room.

'Yes, love; you have been a ministering angel by many sick-beds, and you would have done more if I had suffered you. But what is all this talk about nursing?'

'If some of you will sit down,' remonstrated Judith, 'I'll pour out the tea. But I don't feel as if anybody wanted it while you're standing about higgledy-piggledy.'

Thus reproved, Naomi took her seat meekly, and Oswald, feeling that the reproof applied with double force to him as a visitor, seated himself in a desponding attitude at a corner of the table.

'I want to nurse old Mr. Pentreath, Joshua,' said Cynthia. 'Miss Haggard says there is no nurse to be trusted in Combhaven, and the doctor says the old gentleman must have good nursing. Will you let me go to the Grange for a little while and sit up with him, as I did with Miss Webling?'

Joshua watched her earnest face with a tender smile.

'Why, my love, how anxious you are! And do you think you know enough about sickness—that you would have strength for such a task?'

'It would be a good work, and I should do it with all my heart. God would give me strength and knowledge. I have no fear. I feel often that my life here is of very little use. I am never hap-

pier than when you let me visit the sick people. Let me go to the Grange, Joshua, and nurse poor Mr. Pentreath.'

'You are too good to offer such a thing,' cried Oswald, wondering at the ardour of this delicate, flower-like creature. 'It would be a troublesome task. You have no notion how cross my poor old father is. He abuses the doctor in a most ferocious style—accuses him of picking his pocket. Our housemaid will scarcely go near him. There is a scrub of a girl who works about the house under every one else, a stupid good-natured thing, too much accustomed to hard words to mind them, and she is the only creature I can get to stay in my father's room; but she is clumsy and sleepy.'

'Do you really wish to go, Cynthia?' asked Joshua seriously.

To his mind there was nothing unnatural in this desire of his young wife's. He belonged to a community in which to minister to the sick was a paramount duty, in which affliction was a period of closer brotherhood, a drawing together of those links which bound the little flock to one another at all times.

True, that the Squire was an ungodly person, outside that circle; but he had been in a manner united to Joshua's household by his son's choice of Naomi. Here was a sick man to be snatched from the jaws of Death; here was something higher and nobler, a soul to be saved from the clutch of Satan. That the Squire's body must perish was, in all probability, inevitable—an event not to be staved off by leechings and blisterings, or all the resources of medicine; but there was a great battle to be fought for that immortal part of him, that impalpable, indestructible spark destined for an eternal future of good or evil.

What had the Church of England—of those slumberous days—done for the Squire? Well, it had taken tithe of his substance, and thereby secured to itself his antipathy; it had preached diluted Tillotson, South, and Barrow over his head while he dozed in the noontide sun; it had christened and married him, and held itself in readiness to bury him; and for the rest it had civilly and obligingly let him alone.

It seemed to Joshua Haggard that if his wife

succoured the Squire in his fight with disease and death he too could be by the bedside to defend the sinner against the onslaughts of his invisible foe; for Joshua's positive theology had never been troubled by any doubt of the reality and personality of man's first tempter and perpetual adversary.

'If you really feel that you have a call for this good work, Cynthia, I should be sorry to forbid your obeying it,' he said, after a thoughtful pause.

'It seems too bold to say that I am called to do it,' answered his wife humbly, 'but indeed, Joshua, my heart is drawn towards the poor lonely old man in his sickness and pain.'

'Then you shall go, my dear,' said Joshua decisively.

Cynthia rose as if to depart that moment.

'God bless you for that permission!' cried Oswald.

'You may as well wait till tea's finished,' exclaimed Judith tartly; 'other people want their teas, if you don't. We didn't use to have tea in such a fashion.'

Whereupon Cynthia resumed her seat meekly,

and begged pardon of the authorities for this breach of the household law.

'I don't know how to thank you both,' said Oswald,—'you for your generous offer, Mrs. Haggard, or your husband for his goodness in letting you obey your benevolent inclination; but I am more grateful than I can say. I will take care that you are not over-fatigued by your task. Phœbe—that's the girl I spoke of just now—will do anything you want. She'd work till she dropped, I believe, poor girl, and only requires to be taught. My poor father was delirious last night. That won't frighten you, I hope—if his mind wanders?'

'No,' said Cynthia; 'I was sitting with a poor woman yesterday who was light-headed. She talked of all kinds of strange things. Yet every now and then she spoke quite clearly, and followed the sense when I read to her. I shall not be frightened.'

After tea, when the bondage of etiquette was loosened a little, Naomi stole to her young step-mother's side and kissed her tenderly.

'I am so grateful to you, Cynthia,' she said.

'Dear Naomi, there's no reason for gratitude or

praise. I am only doing my duty. I am sorry you were not permitted to perform this task, dear, as I know it would have seemed sweet to you, for Oswald's sake.'

CHAPTER VIII.

'E'EN AT TURNING O' THE TIDE.'

Cynthia took her place at the Squire's bedside, and assumed the care of the sick-room with as much calmness and self-possession as if she had been trained in a city hospital. That intense faith which made the two Wesleys so strong to resist all earthly opposition is the staff and anchor of all true followers in that wide school which they and Whitfield founded. Joshua's young wife had no fear that her strength would fail her in this ordeal. Whatever strength she needed would be given to her.

It was not a pleasing or an easy task either, this attendance upon an irritable old man, who had served no apprenticeship to sickness, and to whom acute bodily pain was almost a new thing.

'Mrs. Haggard has been so good as to come to

nurse you, father,' said Oswald, when he brought Cynthia to the bedside.

The Squire looked at the small gray figure—'a shadow like an angel with bright hair'—doubtfully.

'I don't know that girl,' he said. 'Your mother was never so pretty.'

'Will you let her nurse you, father?' inquired Oswald.

'I don't want nursing; I only want to be let alone. Give me something to drink,' said the Squire, with some inconsistency.

Cynthia examined the table by the bed, upon which empty medicine-bottles, discarded poultices, rags, and dirty tumblers were crowded in unseemly confusion. There was an uncorked bottle, containing half-a-tumbler of claret.

'Does your father drink that wine?' asked Cynthia, as she washed a tumbler swiftly, while the Squire expressed a general sense of discomfort by feeble moanings.

'Yes; the doctor says he may have claret, but no other wine.'

Cynthia put the tumbler in the wasted hand,

which clutched it with a tremulous eagerness, and supported the old man while he drank. She seemed to have a natural capacity and handiness which made these offices of charity easy to her.

'Phœbe will get you anything you want,' said Oswald, looking on helplessly.

Phœbe was standing on the other side of the bed, breathing hard, and staring at Mrs. Haggard, open-mouthed and open-eyed, as at a supernatural appearance.

But on being thus referred to she made a curtsy, and said she should be pleased to wait upon the lady.

'And do you really think you shall be able to get on?' asked Oswald.

'I shall get on very nicely. You need not be anxious, Mr. Pentreath. It will be best for your father to be kept very quiet.'

'Yes, I daresay. I'll go to my own room. It's on this floor, and I shall be at hand if my father should ask for me. You'll send for me if he does, won't you?'

'Yes; Phœbe shall come for you.'

Oswald lingered by the bedside before going away, and bent over his father with that helpless feeling which robust youth has in the presence of suffering age. It can pity, but can hardly sympathise. If it could share the burden in any way, take half the pain, or all, it would do so; but it cannot measure or understand that agony.

'How are you feeling now, father?' asked the son.

'I feel as if a wolf was gnawing me, that's all,' gasped the old man. 'Go away. You only keep the air from me.'

Cynthia took a loose blanket from an arm-chair, and spread it over the Squire's chest and shoulders, and then went quietly to the nearest window and opened it. The sweet cool night air blew in like a rush of refreshing waters upon a thirsty land.

'That's better,' cried the old man.

'You didn't oughtter open the windows,' said Phœbe; 'the doctor said we was to keep un warm!'

Cynthia found a screen in one corner of the room, and this she placed as a guard against the keen edge of the draught. She had a conviction

that the sufferer needed air, but she was not going to do anything rash or reckless.

'Tell me what the doctor said about the leeches and the poultices, and everything that is to be done, Phœbe,' she said.

At midnight Oswald looked into the room again. His father was sleeping the fitful painful slumber of disease. Phœbe was snoring by the fire. Cynthia was seated by the bedside, reading her pocket Bible by the dim candle-light. What a graceful figure it was in the neatly-fitting gray-stuff gown, the Puritan muslin kerchief crossed over the delicately-moulded bust, the little white cap giving a matronly air to the bright young face!

The room seemed changed somehow since Cynthia's coming. The accumulated litter of the past week had been carried off. Everything was in its place—snowy linen on the bed, the hearth neatly swept, a small bright fire in the shining grate, a cheerful home-like air in the room which a few hours ago had looked so desolate. And all had been done quietly, with the least possible inconvenience to the invalid.

'Has he been long asleep?' asked Oswald.

'About half an hour. I read to him a little before he went off.'

'Out of your Bible?'

'Yes.'

'Did he like your doing that?'

'I think it soothed him.'

Oswald could hardly realise the idea of his father being instructed in the Scriptures by a Methodist preacher's wife. It seemed a general upheaving of things.

This went on for many days and nights. The Squire's life seemed to these patient watchers to tremble in the balance, though the doctor had made up his mind which way the balance was to turn at last. For many days and nights, without weariness or murmuring, Cynthia performed the painful tasks of the sick-room, and was full of love and care for this grim old man, who in his weakness seemed like a baby in her arms, and was fain to submit to be ministered to as a baby might have done. While caring for this poor mortal body of his, she was full of tender anxiety for his imperishable soul; and this

disciple of Tom Paine was fain to listen to that ineffable story which even the most hardened unbeliever must hear with some touch of love and awe. Cynthia had not been taught to be doubtful of death-bed conversions; in her direct and positive creed this sinner—who, perhaps, in all his life had never done a good action or sacrificed a selfish desire—was as near the gates of heaven as the man of spotless life and active benevolence, could he but be brought to acknowledge his unworthiness, to believe in the all-atoning Sacrifice which had been made for him, to accept in implicit faith the pardon that God was for ever holding out to sinners. A Shibboleth, perhaps, this parrot-cry of instantaneous conversion, but this Shibboleth was to Cynthia a great reality.

Curious it must have seemed to the ear of the listener—had there been any one by—to hear this child fighting Satan beside that dying-bed; arguing with the unbelieving mind, sharpened and hardened by fifty-years mature worldliness; pleading, praying, repeating divinest messages of compassion and love. The Squire heard her patiently, which was much.

One night she sang one of Wesley's hymns in a low sweet voice. The sound pleased and soothed the sick man, and after this he often bade her sing to him. Oswald paced the corridor softly sometimes of an evening, listening to those clear and pure tones, which had a soothing influence for him as well as for his father.

'I wish you would let my husband come and read to you, Mr. Pentreath,' Cynthia ventured to say one afternoon when the Squire seemed a little better than usual, and quite free from pain.

'Your husband! Who is he?'

'Joshua Haggard.'

'What, the Ranter? No; I'll have none of his preaching. He's a decent fellow, in his way, and has made money. My son is going to marry his daughter; but I'll have no ranting. I won't have fire and brimstone pelted at me on my deathbed. You may read what you like; it does no harm.'

'I don't think you know what kind of man my husband is,' remonstrated Cynthia gently.

'Don't I! I know what field preachers are. You may hear 'em a mile off, raving about Sodom

and Gomorrah and the worm that never dies. Haggard preached in the fields before he built that chapel of his. I'll have none of his howling.'

This was discouraging; but the Established Church, which, represented by a port-winey vicar of the good old school, had called politely, during the Squire's illness, to offer its ministrations, had also been kept at arm's-length by Mr. Pentreath, who swore that no tithe-pig parson should cross the threshold of his chamber while he had sense enough to forbid him.

Oswald showed considerable anxiety about Cynthia's comfort during this weary time of watching, and Joshua came to the Grange at least once a day to see for himself that his wife was not injuring her health by this work of charity. The acute inflammation had been conquered, chiefly by Cynthia's nursing, as the doctor frankly acknowledged; but the foe left the citadel in so dilapidated a state, that the cessation of active disease was by no means a warrant for the patient's recovery. The lamp flickered in the socket, and might at any moment be suddenly extinguished. The worn-out frame was

not easily to be patched up by high feeding and stimulants, quinine or iron.

Once in every day Joshua Haggard came up to the long gallery, where the family-portraits faced the searching north-west light, which showed every crack in the surface, for a brief interview with his young wife.

'I'm afraid you are not getting enough rest, dearest,' he said, turning the small pale face towards the spring sunshine, and looking at it with anxious scrutiny.

'Yes, indeed, Joshua. I have some hours' sleep every day, while Phœbe watches for me. I let her sleep at night, poor girl; for it seems so painful to her to keep her eyes open after the clock has struck ten.'

'I am glad for you to do this good work, my love. I am proud of you. But remember that you have my happiness in charge. You must not sacrifice health even to duty—for my sake.'

He advanced this plea with a consciousness of its weakness, its selfishness.

'I walk in the garden every day when it is fine,'

said Cynthia, anxious to reassure him as to her well-being. 'Naomi and Oswald take me for a little walk every afternoon. It is such a happiness to me to see her, dear girl.'

'Yes, she has told me about your walks together. It gratifies me to think of your being so united; I feared there was a want of sympathy on Naomi's part.'

'No, Joshua. She has always been good to me; but I think we have been more drawn together since the Squire's illness. How glad I shall be when he gets well, and we can have the wedding! I want to see Naomi in that lovely gray silk. Does Dr. Harrow say that he will soon be well?'

'Dr. Harrow does not seem very hopeful; he thinks his patient in a sadly weak state.'

'But that racking cough is almost gone, and we shall soon make him strong.'

'I hope so, dear; but there is a disease called old age. The Squire has lived a hard life. He did not spare himself in his youth, when he gave himself up to what the world calls pleasure, and he has not spared himself of late years, while he has been a

slave to Mammon. The thread of life is worn very thin, my love.'

This was a disappointment to Cynthia, who had begun to hope for the Squire's recovery. He was not an agreeable old man, but she had nursed him and cared for him, and she had grown in somewise attached to him. Oswald looked on wonderingly while she bent over the bed, soothing her charge with pretty tender speeches, supporting the grizzled head, holding the feverish hand, feeding the grim old sufferer as lovingly as if he had been a pet bird.

'How good you are!' he exclaimed one day. 'Is it in the nature of all women to be so tender? I can just remember my mother nursing me in some small illness, and she was like you; but then I was her favourite son, the creature she loved best on earth, as they tell me. You come here to nurse a stranger, and yet your tenderness for him seems inexhaustible.

'I am so sorry for your poor father that I cannot help loving him,' Cynthia answered simply.

'Ah, I see; that is what the old saw means: "Pity is akin to love."'

Those walks with Naomi and her lover were a

delight to Cynthia at this time; so keen a delight, that it sometimes occurred to her this pleasure might be sinful, a snare and a temptation which she ought in somewise to resist; for Joshua's teaching dwelt much upon snares, and the liability of weak human nature to be led astray by inclination.

After close confinement in the sick-room the very air of heaven was a source of rapture. The bright spring afternoon, the windy sky with patches of deepest blue shining through white fleecy clouds, and just one dark cloud overhead, holding the promise of an April shower; the daffodils waving with every gust; the yellow chestnut-buds just unfolding; the tender young ferns peeping up through the mossy ground in sheltered places, snake fern and adder fern—what could be more beautiful than the neglected old manor at such a season? Even the dark-red cattle had a friendly air, Cynthia thought, and looked at her with grave kindliness.

Never had Naomi been so kind or so loving to the poor little stepmother; and Oswald, who had seemed quite a remote unsympathetic personage a little while ago, came now as near as to be almost brotherly in

his kindness—he was so grateful for Cynthia's devotion to his sick father.

For the space of an hour by Oswald's watch these three perambulated the path on the skirts of the wood, making fresh discoveries of Nature's progress every day, and admiring the wonder of this gradual yet swift awakening of old Mother Earth after the dreary winter sleep. How quickly the flower-buds opened, and the little curled-up leaflets widened into leaves; here, under last year's dead branches, are the ferns of next summer; the willows are yellow-green already; the mossy ground is enamelled with primroses and bluest violets.

'Please God the poor old father picks up strength, we shall be married before the hawthorns are in flower,' said Oswald to his betrothed.

Naomi's only answer was a sigh; for her father had told her how little hope the doctor entertained of his patient's recovery.

There was an appearance of improvement, however, at this time which deceived Oswald and Cynthia and the good-hearted drudge, Phœbe. The Squire's cough was almost gone, though his breath-

ing was still troublesome, and his wits somewhat given to wander in the pauses of wakefulness between his brief slumbers. He was able to be moved from his bed to the great easy-chair, in which spacious piece of furniture he looked like a living mummy, propped up with pillows. This seemed a great advance upon his condition of ten days ago; and Oswald fancied him on the high-road to recovery—an opinion shared by the patient himself, though in querulous moments he declared that he shouldn't trouble anybody long, and that Oswald would soon have the handling of the estate.

'And a nice mess he will make of it, for he knows no more of business than a baby,' grumbled the Squire.

Seeing her charge so far restored, and believing his recovery an assured thing, despite her husband's despondent view of the case, Cynthia was now anxious to return to her home duties. Those duties were not manifold, certainly, since Judith Haggard was the mainspring of the household machine; but Cynthia was at least her husband's companion, and she knew that she was sorely missed by him. She

had carefully instructed Phœbe in all the offices of the sick-room, and felt that she might now leave the Squire to that damsel's care, with just a little supervision and assistance from Oswald, who was a light sleeper, and might look in upon the invalid now and then of a night to give him his wine or his medicine.

When, however, Mrs. Haggard ventured to hint at departure, the Squire's distress was piteous to behold. Could she be so cruel as to talk of leaving him when but for her he should be in his grave? If she left him he should die. Phœbe nurse him, indeed! Phœbe would murder him, with her big rough hands and her clumsy ways. He might die in his bed at any hour, with not a soul to help him, while Phœbe was snoring like a pig by the fireside. That girl thought of nothing but sleeping and eating; she was a lump of selfishness, like all the rest of his servants.

The old man shed tears; and the tears of feeble age are sad to see. What could Cynthia do? The tender heart, in which love and pity were the ruling instincts, was moved to deepest compassion. She

told her husband of the Squire's distress, and he said stay.

'Stay, my love, if you can bear the trial of witnessing the end. It will not be long.'

'Does the doctor really think he will die?'

'Yes, dear; the doctor is quite hopeless. Nothing less than a miracle could save him, he says, and God has ceased to work miracles for our worthless mortal bodies. His supernatural dealings are with our souls.'

'Then I would not leave him on any account.'

'You have never seen death, Cynthia. You are not afraid to face the end?'

'No,' she answered bravely; 'I fear nothing since you have taught me where to put my trust.'

So Cynthia stayed and ministered to the departing sinner, and made these last days of his life sweeter to him than all the arid years of his widowhood, in which human affection had been as dead in him as if he had been one of those conical stones which antiquity chose for its gods. He had grown really attached to his fair young nurse, and submitted to her with a senile docility.

'If I had had a daughter like you, my dear, I should have been a better man,' he said.

'You have had a good son, dear Mr. Pentreath.'

'Yes, Oswald has never given me any trouble; but there's not much in him—a young man to be drawn any way. I'm afraid he'll spend my money like water. It's a hard thing to know one must lie in one's grave, not able to move a finger, while one's property is being made ducks and drakes of. That's the sting of death.'

'No, no, dear friend; the sting of death is sin.'

'And isn't it sinful to fool away a fine estate?' cried the Squire testily.

Wheeled close up to the glowing hearth in his big arm-chair, with a tumbler of warm negus, weak and harmless but soothing to the spirits, on the little table at his elbow, the Squire listened with great complacency to Cynthia's Scripture reading. If the Bible had been something less than it is, the keen old man would hardly have tolerated it, for he started with a strong prejudice in its disfavour. But the

mighty Book compelled his attention, and seemed to appeal to him individually with a force his mortal weakness could not withstand.

Oswald now began to spend his afternoons in the sick-room, save that one hour which he spent out-of-doors with Cynthia and Naomi. The Squire liked to have him there, and was fond of calling his attention to certain passages of Scripture which, in the father's mind, bore upon his son's deficiencies. Oswald was a very patient listener to that pious reading, to those touching Wesleyan hymns which Cynthia used to sing in the gathering twilight. Joshua, while following that sect of Primitive Methodists and field preachers, which the Rev. Hugh Bourne had founded early in the century, had adopted the Wesleyan hymn-book, and differed from the modern Wesleyans chiefly in his closer adherence to the principles of their pious founder.

Sad, yet not unpleasing, days gliding gently by in that quiet chamber; a spacious bedroom, oak-panelled, with three deep-set windows, a carved mantelpiece, six feet high, and a curious old basket grate set round with blue and white Dutch tiles,

Scriptural illustrations, to which the Squire referred now and then when Cynthia was reading.

'David! ah! there he is, slaying Goliath—the third from the top. I remember when I was a boy I used to take him for Jack the Giant-killer. And David was a sinner, was he, though the Lord loved him? Ah, the Lord had need to be fond of me, for I've been a great sinner. I wonder if John Wilkes is in heaven?'

Sweet slow days, which hardly left a trace behind them, one being so like another, save a vague memory of a pleasing sadness. It seemed to Oswald, by and by, as if all his life were shut in this grave old room, and the outside world were something in which he had no part. Naomi noticed that his manner was dreamy and absent-minded at this time, a change which she ascribed to natural anxiety about his father.

It was about half-way between midnight and morning, just when the night is coldest, most silent, most dismal, that the Squire called Cynthia to his bedside. He had been a little more restless than

usual, and had wandered more between his snatches of broken sleep; had talked of his wild youth, naming old friends, old loves, long dead and half-forgotten.

'What was the name of that fellow who supped with us at the Blue Posts?' he asked eagerly. 'You know, don't you? a man with big whiskers and a belcher handkerchief—a fighting man.'

Cynthia knelt down by the bed and took his cold hand and chafed it gently. There was a sharp ring in his voice which she had never heard before.

'That's a good girl, Polly—yes, my hand's very cold. You always had a good heart, Polly; but too fond of spending money. Yes, Polly, better marry the cheesemonger. He means well.'

Then the dull eyes turned suddenly on Cynthia with slowly returning consciousness.

'Is it you, child? And you say God loves sinners?'

'God loves all things that He has made,' answered Cynthia earnestly; 'and Christ died to save sinners. If you repent of all your sins, dear

Mr. Pentreath, and believe in that atoning Sacrifice—'

'I'm sorry I didn't live a better life, and that I hadn't a daughter like you,' interrupted the Squire faintly; and letting his head sink softly upon Cynthia's breast, he quietly loosened his feeble hold upon this mortal life, and passed into the unknown land beyond it.

Not at first did Cynthia know that this was death; and when the truth dawned upon her she uttered no cry, gave way to neither terror nor agitation, but gently laid the lifeless head upon the pillow, and went quietly to tell Oswald Pentreath that he was fatherless.

She was surprised, even in this awful moment, to see that his door was ajar and a light burning in his room. She knocked, and he answered at once, 'Come in.'

'Why has he been sitting up?' she wondered.

He was sitting at a table with an open book before him, the candles burned down to the sockets of the old plated candlesticks, his hair and dress disordered as if he had been lying down, his eyes hollow

and weary-looking. He started at sight of Cynthia, but did not move from his seat or change his dejected attitude, his elbows on the table, his head leaning on his hands.

'What is the matter?' he asked. 'Is my father worse?'

'All his pain is over, dear Oswald. God has taken him to His rest.'

'And you were with him at the last—alone—he died in your arms?'

'Yes.'

'You are a saint, an angel,' cried Oswald passionately, brushing the tears from his eyes. 'You came into this house as an angel of mercy—you brought light to my poor old father's darkened mind. You made his last days the sweetest he had ever known. How can I ever forget your goodness?'

'There is nothing for you to remember. I have only done my duty. How pale you look, Mr. Pentreath; this sudden loss has shocked you! He died so peacefully, and his last words were good. Is not that comforting?'

'How could his thoughts be evil with an angel at

his side? Poor old man! And he is gone? Yes, it is very sudden.'

'Why were you sitting up all night? Had you a presentiment that the end was so near?'

'No,' with a bitter laugh. 'I sat up because I have lost the knack of sleeping. My thoughts are too active, and I try to quiet them with philosophy; but I can no more read than I can sleep. My ideas travel in a circle, and always come back to the same point.'

'You have been too anxious about you father,' said Cynthia, with a look that was half pity, half wonder.

'Yes; I am too devoted a son—that is my strong point.'

'Will you go and see him?'

'Yes; and there will be people to send for, I suppose, as soon as it is light?'

He opened a shutter. The stars were pale in a cold gray sky: daybreak was at hand, and in that chilly half-light Oswald Pentreath's haggard face looked like a ghost's.

He followed Cynthia to the Squire's room.

Phœbe had roused the small household. The housekeeper was there already, and had begun the last dismal offices which life can render to death.

'I laid out your sweet mother, Mr. Pentreath,' faltered the crone. 'She looked lovely in her coffin.'

The old butler had gone to the village to awaken the sexton, in order that the passing bell might speedily inform Combhaven that its seigneur had departed. Phœbe stood at the bottom of the great fourpost-bed, with her apron over her face, weeping as in duty bound—not that she had loved Squire Pentreath, but because it was proper to cry at a death or a funeral. To weep for her deceased master was an obligation which, although not expressly set forth in the Catechism, was implied in the general idea of doing her duty in that state of life to which it had pleased God to call her. And if the Squire, although a hard man, should have happened to do the right thing in the way of legacies and mourning, it would be a comfort to remember having honoured him with these disinterested tears.

Oswald went round and kissed the cold brow of

the dead, and then stood by the bedside, looking down at that unconscious clay, with a curious blank look in his own face, as if he knew not whether there were any further duty required of him. 'He looked clean daft,' the housekeeper said afterwards, when she and the old man-servant discussed the dismal scene over a substantial breakfast.

The shutters had been opened, and the candles burned with a yellow glare in the cold gray light. Cynthia looked at her neat silver watch, Joshua's gift upon her wedding-morning.

'Half-past five o'clock,' she said. 'I think I had better go home now, Mr. Pentreath. If Joshua should hear the passing bell, he would be coming to fetch me.'

'Why not wait till he comes?' asked Oswald.

'I would rather save him the trouble. I can do no more good here.'

'No; you can do no more good.'

She took her black mantle from a drawer, and put on her bonnet, and then went up to Oswald, who was still standing by the bed with that helpless absent look in his face.

'Good-bye, Mr. Pentreath; I hope you will take comfort to your heart in this loss.'

'I am coming with you. You cannot go home alone at this hour.'

'Do you think I am afraid of the birds or the opening flowers?' Cynthia asked.

'You must not go alone.'

'Come with me, if you like. Joshua will be glad to see you. You can stop to breakfast with us and see Naomi.'

Cynthia thought it a work of charity to take him away from that death-chamber. Joshua could comfort and advise him.

The morning air blew in coolly when Oswald softly opened the great hall-door. That clear cool light of dawn had a soothing influence; the solemn stillness of park and wood, the hollow murmur of yonder steel-gray sea, flecked with whitest foam, awed and yet comforted the heart, or so it seemed to Cynthia as she walked beside her silent companion. The bell began to toll as they came from the park into the wooded lane that led down to the bay and the open space at the beginning of the

high street. Each slow and dismal stroke made Cynthia shiver, as if each repetition were a surprise.

She made no attempt to console her companion during this lonely walk, which might be supposed a fitting opportunity for the expression of sympathy. If he needed human consolation, Joshua's wisdom could better measure and administer to his necessity, she thought; and, next to Joshua, Naomi would be the best, the most natural consoler.

But to Cynthia's surprise, when they came to the little green gate, Oswald refused to go in. The parlour shutters had been opened, and the household was evidently astir. She urged him to stay to breakfast, or at least to see Joshua.

'No,' he said; 'it is very kind of you to wish it; but I am too much upset. I would rather go back. I shall have many things to arrange. I may be wanted.'

'Joshua shall come to you, then,' replied Cynthia. 'Good-bye.'

She gave him her hand. He held it in both his own for a moment or two, looking at her with an expression full of sadness, half piteous, half pleading.

He bent his head over the cold gloveless hand and kissed it. There were tears upon it when he let it go, and, with a scarcely audible blessing, he left Cynthia Haggard standing at the gate, and walked quickly back towards the Grange.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SORROWS OF WERTHER.

Oswald Pentreath, having set his father's papers in order, and reduced the dusty chaos of the old Squire's private study into form, found himself, comparatively speaking, a rich man. Those long years of retirement in which Squire Pentreath had held himself aloof from all social intercourse had not been spent in vain. They left their fruit behind them in the shape of stock, and shares, and bonds, which all meant money; for Mr. Pentreath had not speculated his savings in wild ventures, but had cloven to safe investments, and had been content with a reasonable percentage. Not even for the chance of doubling his capital would he have risked it. His was not the genius of the stockjobber, but rather the plodding temper of the village miser, who puts coin to coin, and finds an all-sufficient joy in the growth of his hoard.

The estate was in excellent order—every mortgage paid off—and the rental was close to three thousand a year. The Squire's investments were worth another thousand, and brought Oswald's income to an amount which, to a young man who had seldom enjoyed the unfettered use of a five-pound note, seemed inordinate wealth.

The Squire had made a will, dated the year of his son Arnold's flight, bequeathing twenty pounds a year to each of his old servants, and all the rest of his property, real and personal, to Oswald. There was no mention of the younger son. In the letter which informed Arnold of his father's death, Oswald affectionately urged his brother to give up a seafaring life and return to Combhaven, where he should have one of the farms and a thousand a year. 'My father's will was evidently made in a fit of anger against you,' wrote Oswald; 'you must not think that I could be so unjust as to take advantage of my father's injustice and keep all for myself. No, Arnold; I am sure you know me better than to suppose me capable of such iniquity. I shall be a rich man in any case. You must have had enough

of the sea by this time. Come back, my dear brother, for the sake of the good old days when we were boys together. I want you more than I can say. I love you as dearly as I did when we were children, and I was the big brother. Do you remember that summer day when we lost ourselves in Matcherly Wood, and you were so tired I was obliged to carry you home? When we had got about half way you wanted to carry me, though I was twice your size. I never pass that corner of the wood without remembering what you said, and your clinging arms round my neck, and your warm cheek next mine.'

The Squire being laid with his forefathers, and honoured with a handsome funeral—which was attended by many people who had detested him living, but reverenced him as a parochial institution dead—life at the Grange fell back into its old quiet round, save that the door was more frequently assailed by importunate tenants, who boldly asked favours of the new lord which they would not have dared to hint at to the old one. The old servants felt that the spirit of parsimony was gone from the household, and kept

a better table; but they had been so long and severely trained in economy, that extravagance was an impossibility for them, and Oswald had nothing to apprehend on that score. For his own part, the new master had a curious feeling of freedom as he paced the dull old rooms and rattled the money in his pockets absently, wondering how it had come there.

He looked very handsome and melancholy in his sable suit, and the young ladies who came to the parish church, where he worshipped alone in his big pew on Sunday mornings, thought it a hard thing that he should have engaged himself to a Methodist parson's daughter.

He attended Little Bethel of an evening, they were informed, which seemed an unmanly dallying with two creeds—to say nothing of chapel being so much less genteel than church, and a mode of salvation peculiarly adapted for the shopkeeping class, who did not mind perspiring together in a limited space, and inhaling one another's breath.

Naomi's wedding seemed a long way off in these days, when the Squire's funeral was still the newest topic in Combhaven, and when people had not yet

left off disputing in a friendly way as to the number of the mourning coaches, or inveighing bitterly against those tenants who ought to have attended the funeral and had not done so. Shadowy and remote—the merest speck in a cloudy future—seemed that marriage-day which had once been so near, the fair to-morrow of life. Oswald was quite broken down by his father's death—more grieved than even Naomi, who best knew the softness of his nature, had expected him to be. It was not likely that he could talk of marriage at such a time, and Naomi was neither surprised nor offended at his silence about the wedding that was to have been, and the far-off wedding which was to be.

She put away her wedding dress on the day of the Squire's funeral, while the sepulchral bell, which had rung out its solemn note for the passing of his soul, tolled again in the windy April weather, while, through changing lights and shadows, by fluttering young leaves, and under the blue sky where the lark was singing above the dark brown earth newly pierced by the green corn-spears—came the black funeral train—sable plumes, horses' manes, mourners' scarves

tossing in the fresh April breeze—slowly winding down the hilly road to Combhaven.

The funeral bell was in Naomi's ears as she folded the pretty pearl-gray silk—the first silk dress she had ever possessed—shedding some quiet tears as she smoothed the folds, and laid the garment in a drawer, wrapped in fresh white linen, with a sprinkling of dried lavender, as beseemed so precious a fabric. There was the serviceable brown cloth pelisse, too, which she was to have worn on her journey to Cheltenham, where she and Oswald were to have spent their honeymoon. That also must be put away for the days to come. Naomi's wear for the next six months was to be sombre black. She had put on mourning for her betrothed's father, as in duty bound. Cynthia also wore black, and aunt Judith had produced a suit of ancient sable, rusty but whole, not sorry to have this opportunity of wearing out the surplus stock left from her mourning for her sister-in-law, when Joshua, in his character of grief-stricken widower, had been naturally liberal, and had allowed her to lay in large supplies of bombazine and crape.

Oswald said little about the postponed wedding, but he came to Mr. Haggard's as often as before his father's death; and even Judith, who was lying in wait for a deterioration in his character now that he had come into his fortune, could not yet put her finger on a flaw. He was changed, nevertheless; but the change was sweet and commendable in his nature, as it was in Hamlet, when that young prince gave way to moodiness and despondency after the loss of his parent. He was melancholy, and often absent-minded, his cheek paler than of old, his eye heavier.

Never had Naomi loved him so tenderly as now, when, for the first time since their betrothal, he needed sympathy and consolation. To her who so deeply loved her father, this grief for a parent seemed in no wise strained or unnatural. True that the Squire had not been one's ideal of a father—not a gracious and dignified figure like that dead Hamlet who revisited the glimpses of the moon; but death has a sanctifying influence—nay, even a fantastical power, which lends new attributes to the image of the departed—and Oswald, whose youth had been

made a time of restraint and deprivation by his father's meanness, was soft-hearted enough to regret his tyrant.

Never did a man seem less inclined to take advantage of a loosened rein and run into riot and extravagance. Day after day Oswald led the same calm, orderly life—riding or reading in the mornings, according to the weather; devoting his afternoons and evenings to his betrothed. He had thoughts of buying, or building, a yacht; but deferred even this indulgence in the hope of Arnold's return.

'We'll build our yacht here, in Combhaven,' he said; 'and Arnold shall superintend the work, and be skipper.'

Oswald looked forward to his brother's coming with an almost feverish impatience. It seemed as if there were some innate weakness in his character which made him incapable of enjoying the privilege of independence. Now that his father was gone, he wanted his brother for a guide and adviser. Or it might be only the affection of the elder brother for the younger, made a barren love by long years of

separation, which now yearned for the unforgotten companion of boyhood. Whatever feeling it was that made him anxious, Oswald's anxiety was very evident; and Naomi sympathised with him in this longing, and loved to hear him talk of his brother.

'How fond I shall be of him!' she said one evening, when they were sitting on the old stone bench in the wilderness, talking of Arnold. 'He is like you, Oswald; I have heard my father say so. He remembers you both as boys.'

'Yes, we were always considered very much alike. But Arnold is stouter and stronger built than I—a man of tougher fibre altogether. It seemed the most natural thing in the world for him to run away to sea. You might have prophesied it of him when he was two years old. Such a hardy, bold, uncompromising little vagabond, but brimming over with affection.'

'And fond of you, Oswald?'

'Fond of me! Bless his loving little heart! He used to run after me like an affectionate puppy when he first began to toddle; such a round fat little thing in those baby days; always ready for

fisticuffs in my defence, though I was twice his size. There was a time when he would not go to sleep of a night unless I sat on the edge of his bed and told him stories. Yes, I have good reason to love him, dear fellow; and the strongest claim he has upon my love is my latest memory of my mother, when I saw the sweet pale face lying on the pillow, and Arnold's baby eyes looking up at it.'

The tears came to his eyes as he spoke of that sad memory, almost dreamlike in its remoteness. Naomi put her hand in his without a word. Only by that gentle touch did she remind him that it was her mission to share all his griefs, even the old unforgotten sorrows of his earliest days.

It was a mild May evening—an evening on the edge of summer, with a perfect calmness in atmosphere and sky—an evening on which the soul broods on sad, sweet thoughts. The lovers had been sitting alone for an hour or more, talking by fits and starts, with lengthening intervals of silence.

'My father has been dead five weeks, hasn't he, Naomi?' Oswald asked, after a long pause, during which Naomi's needle had been methodically travel-

ling along a fine linen wristband, leaving a line of pearly stitches behind it. The manufacture of a shirt for her father was a work of high art with Naomi.

'Yes, dear; five weeks yesterday.'

'Then in seven weeks more we must be married, Naomi,' said Oswald, as seriously as he had spoken of his mother's death.

This was his first word about the postponed marriage, and it startled Naomi as if it had been the most unlikely subject for a lover's discourse.

'So soon, dear?'

'Three months, Naomi. Surely that is long enough to wait out of respect to the dead. It is not as if we meant to have a grand wedding. We will just walk quietly into the old parish church some morning, with your father and his wife, and aunt Judith and Jim, and there shall be a postchaise at the lych gate, ready to drive us to Cheltenham. Let me see, this is the twenty-fourth of May. We might be married early in July. Why should we wait any longer?'

'Dear Oswald, you must know I have hardly a wish that is not yours,' Naomi began earnestly.

'I know you are all goodness.'

'But—'

'But what, love?'

'I have fancied—it may be nothing more than fancy perhaps, but you must not be angry with me for speaking of it—I have fancied lately that there was some change in your feeling for me; it is not that you have been less kind or affectionate, yet I have felt the change. You remember how my father wished that we should be very sure of each other's sincerity. That is why he wanted us to wait two years before we were even engaged. The two years are not gone yet; and if—if the change has come—the change he thought likely, he who knows the human heart and its weakness—let us loosen the bond, dear Oswald. There shall be no word of complaint from me—I should neither blame you nor think ill of you, dear love—I should honour you for being frank and truthful with me—and keep the memory of our happy days as the most sacred part of my life—and be your affectionate friend to my death.'

'Best, noblest, dearest, you are only too good for

me!' cried Oswald, clasping his betrothed to his breast, moved to a rapture of reverence and regard by her generous kindness. 'No, I have never changed to you—no, I could never change in my esteem, my admiration for all that is highest in woman. Do you remember those verses of Waller's, dear:

'Amoret! as sweet and good
As the most delicious food,
Which, but tasted, does impart
Life and gladness to the heart.'

You are my Amoret, dearest. What do I want with Sacharissa's beauty, "which to madness doth incline"?'

'But you ought to go to London now that you are free and rich; you ought to see the world, Oswald, and in London you may meet your Sacharissa,' suggested Naomi, radiant with happiness.

She had said what had long been in her mind to say. She had made her offer of self-sacrifice, in all good faith, and it had been rejected. She had no further fear or hesitation.

'I don't care about London, love. It is nothing but a den of thieves, according to my poor father's

description. When I see it we will see it together, and go to the Tower, and St. Paul's, and the wax-works, and Westminster Abbey, like regular country cousins. Come, Naomi, let us be serious and talk about the future. There is the old house to be brightened and smartened a little before I take my wife home to it. I should have had much ado to screw a new carpet and a coat of whitewash out of my father; but I am the master now, and I can pull down the Grange and build an Italian villa after Palladio, if you like.'

'Dear Oswald, you must know that I would not have you disturb a stone of the old house.'

'In good faith, dear, I shouldn't care to do it. It is the house my mother lived and died in, the first house my eyes saw, the house where my brother was born, the only house that has ever been home to me, though, Heaven knows, it has been but a cheerless home at times. No, we won't alter, Naomi; we will only beautify. I have been too idle all this time. I'll send to Exeter for an architect, and put the business in hand at once.'

The architect arrived on the scene about a week

later, and made a somewhat supercilious inspection of the good old house, which had seemed to its occupiers solid enough to last for another three hundred years, but which, according to the architect, was in a very perilous condition. He tapped the oak panels contemptuously, pronounced the flooring of the upper stories too worm-eaten for anything save entire reinstatement, feared that the whole fabric required under-pinning, and took an altogether despondent view of the matter.

'You want the thing done thoroughly, I suppose, Mr. Pentreath,' he said.

'I should like the drawing-room painted, and the sitting-room up-stairs; and if you could build a greenhouse anywhere—'

'Of course, of course—you must have a conservatory opening out of the drawing-room. If we were to glaze that western end, now, and throw out a rotunda at the end for tropical plants, palms and so on, you know. I did the same thing for Sir Brydges Baldrick's place on the other side of Exeter, and it had a charming effect. I'll make you a sketch if you like.'

'You are very good,' said Oswald dubiously; 'but I don't think my father would have liked—'

He had conscientious scruples about spending so much money—squandering hundreds of pounds upon fanciful improvements—not that he set undue value upon the money himself, but from the thought of what an agony of indignation such an outlay would have caused his father. Rotundas, forsooth! Could that lean old miser lie quiet in his grave while his beloved guineas were being wasted on such trumpery?

'Really, now, Mr. Pentreath,' said the architect, with the easy assurance of a professional man employed by the best families, 'I should imagine the question was not so much what your father would have liked, were he living to enjoy his opinion, but what will please your wife when you bring her home here. Rather a dismal house for a young lady, I should think. A domed conservatory, now, at the end of this drawing-room, would have an enlivening effect. As it is, there is a meanness about the room; long and narrow, no variety, no relief. But you must please yourself. Shall we go to the boudoir?'

The room which the architect insisted on calling a boudoir was the pretty parlour on the first floor which Mrs. Pentreath had used. Here the professional adviser suggested so many improvements—a marble mantelpiece and a more civilised stove, French windows and a balcony, an alcove built out at the end for a statue, with a painted glass window behind it—that Oswald felt as if the Grange were going to be improved off the face of the earth unless he made a bold stand against the improver.

'This was my mother's room,' he said. 'I wouldn't alter it for the world.'

The architect shrugged his shoulders and felt inclined to ask, 'Then what do you want me for, sir, if you have made up your mind to keep your money in your pockets?' But there were certain things about which the architect was arbitrary—flooring which must be taken up, warped and shrunken oaken panels which must be replaced by new ones, passages and servants' offices which must be altered and improved to adapt them to the requirements of a more civilised form of life.

'Think of the change which has taken place

in our habits,' exclaimed the architect conclusively.

Oswald submitted, and a voluminous specification was the result of this interview. This in due course was submitted to a builder of Barnstaple and a builder of Exeter; whereupon the Exeter builder, as the man of more advanced views and larger capital, or credit, won the day; and about a fortnight afterwards sent a small army of white-jacketed men to Pentreath Grange, who took the place in hand, and made haste to render it utterly odious and uninhabitable. Oswald contrived to sleep in the old house, shifting his quarters as the men followed him from room to room, now taking out his windows, anon cutting a rotten patch out of his ceiling, and descending upon him, like Jove, in a shower of plaster.

Having no home of his own at this period of disruption, he spent his days in the house of his betrothed, sharing the minister's homely fare, hearing all aunt Judith's complaints against the general incapacity of her subordinates, and spending long and quiet hours talking or reading aloud in the neat par-

lour where Naomi and her stepmother sat at work.

'What women you are for plain needlework!' he exclaimed one warm afternoon in a sudden burst of impatience, wearied by the rhythmical movement of the two needles methodically stitching on, no matter how passionate the subject of his reading—whether Rebecca was standing on the verge of the castle parapet, or Constance de Beverley left to perish in her living grave. 'I never saw anything like your perpetual industry. One would suppose it were a kind of feminine treadmill, by which you do penance for your sins.'

'We have nothing else to do,' said Cynthia, with a faint sigh. 'Naomi is teaching me to make her father's shirts; if I could not do that, I could do nothing for him. But I'm afraid my stitching will never be so good as Naomi's.'

Oswald looked out of the window listlessly across the row of stocks and carnations in red flower-pots. It was a midsummer afternoon, warm to oppressiveness. There was a perfume of newly-cut hay from the meadows behind the First and Last, a faint

breath from distant bean-fields in flower, the warm air heavy as with the incense Earth offers to her goddess Summer. The bricklayers were hard at work up at the Grange, and there was a run upon that thin and sour cider which had been the old Squire's household beverage, and which nothing less than very warm weather and honest toil could render acceptable to the human palate.

Oswald had an air of being tired of life this afternoon as he threw himself back in his chair, and sighed, and stifled a yawn, and looked far away across the haycocks yonder. Naomi glanced up at him now and then from her work with grave observant eyes. It seemed to her that there was a jarring chord somewhere. He was not happy. And how was it, and why was it? Not grief for his father's death, surely; that cloud had passed. Impatience for his brother Arnold's return perhaps; that seemed more likely.

There was no idea now of the marriage being early or late in July. The improvements and reparations at the Grange would not be finished till October at the earliest, and Oswald must have his

house ready before he could take to himself a wife. Naomi felt that the wedding was still far off.

'I shall bring you a new book to-morrow afternoon,' said Oswald, rousing himself from his reverie.

'By the author of *Waverley?*'

'No; you cannot have a new novel by the author of *Waverley* every day, though he writes two, and sometimes three, a year. This is quite a different kind of book—a study of the human heart—a man's great sorrow described by himself. He was coward enough to let the sorrow make an end of him, instead of making an end of his sorrow—strangling it as Hercules strangled the snakes in his cradle—as a brave man would have done, no doubt,' with a short laugh, half scorn, half bitterness.

'Is it a book that a Christian may read?' asked Naomi. 'But I am sure you would not bring us any book in which there were evil thoughts.'

'There are no evil thoughts in this—only an irresistible fate governing a weak soul. There is no sin in the book—only foolishnes and an overmastering sorrow.'

'What is it called?'

'The *Sorrows of Werther*, a translation from the German of Goethe—a book that set Germany in a blaze many years ago, but which I never saw till the other day. I bought the volume at a bookstall in Exeter, when I went over to settle with the builders.'

The reading of *Werther* began on the following afternoon, in the wilderness. Naomi and her lover were alone, Cynthia having gone to sit with an old woman of the flock, whose frame was a kind of museum for the exhibition of interesting varieties in the rheumatic line.

Oswald looked disappointed at losing one of his auditors.

'I thought Mrs. Haggard would have liked *Werther*,' he said.

'She always reads to old Mrs. Pincote on Wednesday afternoons. She said you were to begin the book all the same—she would enjoy hearing any part of it. But if you would rather not begin to-day—'

'My unselfish Naomi! No, dear, I shall read to you. It is of your pleasure I think at all times, you know, Naomi.'

'You are too good to me.'

Oswald began rather lazily, and dawdled so much over the pages—stopping to talk now and then, and stopping to yawn very often—that he got no farther than the threshold of the story when five o'clock struck from the old gray tower, and it was time to go back to the house for tea.

'I'm afraid you don't find it very interesting so far,' said Oswald.

'It is not like *Ivanhoe* or the *Antiquary*,' replied Naomi; 'but it is very pretty. The young man seems kind and amiable—fond of children—warmly attached to his friend—fond of picturesque scenery.'

'Yes, he is all that. It is a picture painted in delicate half tints at the beginning—the strong colouring comes afterwards.'

They went into the woods next day for their afternoon ramble, Cynthia accompanying them, and Oswald carrying *Werther* in his pocket. They peeped in at the Grange on their way. It looked a chaos of raw plaster and new deal, and did not invite a long inspection. Oswald had consented to the rotunda for tropical plants, and one end of the long drawing-room was open to the daylight.

'You are going to be mistress of quite a handsome mansion, Naomi, and will have to play the great lady,' said Oswald, laughing at the look of consternation with which his betrothed contemplated the improvements.

'That I shall never be able to do, Oswald.'

'There I can't agree with you. Nature intended you for a person of importance. There are only a few details to be learnt—how to issue invitations, the precedence of your guests, to drive a pair of ponies, to play the Lady Bountiful with discretion, and so on. I have more to learn as country squire than you as the squire's wife.'

'I wish Providence had not made you so rich, Oswald. It seems ungrateful to repine at blessings, but if you had been my equal in birth and fortune I should have been the happiest of women.'

'It will be very ungrateful of you if you are not the happiest of women with that rotunda,' said Oswald gaily; and then they went across the park—it was to be really a park in future, and Oswald was eager to introduce a herd of deer—and from the park

into the tangle of greenery, amid the ever-shifting lights and shadows of the wood.

Here they found a ferny bank, more luxurious than any sofa, on which the two girls sat down to work, while Oswald lay on the grass at their feet, and resumed the story of Werther. He read long, and read well, losing his own identity in that of the melancholy hero. He came to the pretty house on the skirts of the forest, and the picture of Charlotte cutting hunches of black bread for the eager little brothers and sisters before setting out for the ball. That innocent image of youth and beauty was something new to the listeners. Not even in the pages of Scott had they met with so pure and perfect a picture of womanhood.

Then came the rustic dance, and the thrill of rapture that moved Werther's breast when his hand touched the maiden's for the first time, and he floated in the waltz with her, and felt a lightness he had never known before, as if he no more belonged to grovelling humanity; the consciousness of sorrow and loss when he heard that she was pledged to another—the thunderstorm—the simple, childish

games by which Charlotte beguiled the terrors of her companions—the whole description as artless as Goldsmith's pictures of the Primrose family, but with a ground-swell of passion below the placid surface which Goldsmith knew not.

'And since that time sun, moon, and stars may go their ways; I know not day from night: the world around me has vanished.'

Cynthia's work dropped on her lap. She sat with her large blue eyes fixed on the reader, her lips slightly parted; all her soul in that listening look. For the first time she heard the story of a love that was fatal—not like Rebecca's unrequited passion, elevating and strengthening the soul by the ordeal of a silent sorrow—but an over-mastering love taking possession of a weak nature, and holding it as the seven devils held their fated prey.

And this was what love meant sometimes in the world; not a reverential affection, not gratitude, esteem, respect, such as she had given to Joshua, and which had made marriage with him seem the highest honour that Providence could bestow—but blind, unreasoning passion—a fire kindled in a

moment, and consuming the soul. She knew that Werther would never be happy again. She longed intensely to follow that devious path of his; to know if he struggled and conquered, or yielded and fell. She found herself wishing that some evil fate—at least a convenient fever or merciful consumption—would remove Charlotte's excellent betrothed.

'No. I do not deceive myself! I read in her eyes a deep interest in me and my fate. Yes, I feel, and in this I will trust my own heart, that she—O, dare I, can I, breathe the heaven in those words? —I feel that she loves me!'

At these words Oswald closed the book suddenly, with a sigh.

'Will you read to us again after tea?' Cynthia asked eagerly, when the inexorable church clock warned them that they had but just time to be punctual in their attendance at the tea-table.

'I thought you would like the book,' said Oswald.

'It is beautiful,' she sighed.

He looked up at her, and their eyes met. Dangerous for such eyes so to meet, such thoughts in

the minds of each, such disquiet in either heart. Cynthia's delicate colour had faded to ivory pale before that lingering look had ended. Fatal book, which told them what was amiss in their lives!

They walked home for the most part in silence, though Oswald tried to be merry about the rotunda, and the tremendous things that the Exeter architect was doing with the Grange, half against its owner's will. His gaiety had a forced sound, and Naomi looked at him wonderingly. Why was it that since his father's death he had been so unlike his old self —so fitful and variable?

After tea they went to the wilderness, and sat there while the soft summer light faded gently into gray evening, and the bats skimmed to and fro above their heads, and distant nightingales called to each other in the woods. Oswald read into the heart of the book—read until Werther's passion had grown from dawn to mid-day—from a rose-coloured dream of innocence and beauty, pure as morning, to the lurid gloom of a thunder-charged sky.

The earliest stars were up, silver pale, when he shut the book without a word. Joshua Haggard came

through the little orchard and looked at the group with a grave smile.

'Reading all this time, Oswald!' he exclaimed, 'and some foolish fiction, I'll be bound. How much of your life you waste upon fancies!'

'Fancy is sometimes sweeter than reality,' answered Oswald, 'and real life has given me very little to do.'

'A pity,' said the minister.

'We cannot all have our mission. One man is born a preacher, like you; another a soldier, like Wellington; or a lawyer and defender of the oppressed, like Brougham. I was born nothing; born to enjoy the hunting in winter, and the sunshine in summer; to lie in Pentreath woods and read Byron; to do no harm, I hope, and any good that I can.'

The minister sighed.

'The blessings Providence gives us are charges,' he said. 'We shall have to account for them.'

They went back to the house together, and Oswald took his place at the usual assembling of the household for evening prayer. To-night the preacher chose the parable of the Talents for his reading and

exposition. Oswald felt that the moral drawn therefrom was intended for his admonition. His house, gardens, park, farm, woods, shares, and stocks were the ten talents for which he was at present in no wise able to give a satisfactory account. So far he had done nothing to improve the condition of the labourer upon his land; to let in the light of Gospel truth, or the free air of heaven to those stone cabins in which the hind and his family pigged in the company of their pigs. He had thought of improving his own house, but not of draining those stifling dens. He had been too easy a landlord, ready to grant any favour his tenants asked; but had taken no trouble to discover the state of the toil-bowed tiller of the soil and his half-starved wife and children, the husbandman who was compelled to receive two shillings of the nine that made his weekly wage in the shape of sour cider.

The time had been when Oswald Pentreath's mind was full of plans for doing good to his fellowmen, and when he had looked upon the day of his independence as the dawning of a new era for the labourers on his land, but since his father's death he

had been the victim of a distraction which had put all philanthropic intentions out of his mind.

'When Arnold comes back I shall be able to set things going in a good way. Arnold has more energy than I have,' he thought, expecting every good thing as a consequence of his brother's return.

CHAPTER X.

'TWO SOULS MAY SLEEP AND WAKE UP ONE.'

It was about a week after Mr. Pentreath had begun *Werther*, and he was now approaching the end of the story, when he came to the minister's house at his usual hour, and found Cynthia sitting alone in the parlour. Naomi had a headache, and had gone upstairs to lie down. It was not often that Joshua Haggard's daughter gave way to any such feminine ailment, and it was a surprise to Oswald to find her absent. He had been riding among his farms all the morning, looking at ancient tiled roofs that had a tendency to subside in the middle; at barns and cart-sheds, with mouldering thatches and worm-eaten timbers; at enclosures of meadow-land, where primroses, cowslips, and wild hyacinths grew abundantly, but where the grass was sour for lack of draining.

'I wanted her to rest on the sofa here,' said Cynthia, 'but she fancied she would be better in a

darkened room. She has been looking ill for the last few days. I am sometimes afraid'—timidly, and with hesitation—'that she is not quite happy.'

'I am afraid we are none of us quite happy,' answered Oswald, with an undisguised sigh.

Cynthia's needle travelled to and fro with the usual rhythm. It seemed to Oswald as if it were some weary tune to which he was forced to listen.

'Shall I go on with *Werther?*' he asked presently, after he had looked at the stocks and carnations, and over them at the sleepy old inn, where the landlord stood in his porch and contemplated his neighbours, like an image of immutability. People who could remember Combhaven twenty years ago remembered just the same figure in the porch. It had grown a trifle more obese in the twenty years, that was all.

'I would rather you waited till Naomi was well enough to hear the end,' said Cynthia.

'But are not you anxious to know what becomes of that unhappy wretch? Have you no pity for him?' asked Oswald almost angrily.

'I pity him for being so wretched,' answered

Cynthia; 'but I think if he had been good, and wise, and brave, he would have gone far away where he would never have seen Charlotte any more. Instead of writing unhappy letters to his friend he would have prayed to God to help him, and fled from temptation.'

'You will see that in the end he did go away—very far from Charlotte and temptation. But you have seen him in the heat of the battle: you will see him by and by a conqueror—or conquered—whichever you like to call it.'

'Will you let me read the end for myself? You can read it aloud to us both when Naomi is better.'

'No; you shall hear the end as you have heard the rest—from my lips.'

'But Naomi—' expostulated Cynthia.

'I will read it again to Naomi. Why should I not read it to you this afternoon? You have been more interested in the story than Naomi.'

Cynthia made no further objection, but went on with her work silently. Oswald took his favourite seat by the open window, in the shadow of the chintz curtain, with the spicy odours of stocks and carna-

tions floating in upon the sultry air. They had the room almost entirely to themselves. Aunt Judith came in and out two or three times in the afternoon on some small errand, and looked at the two with a curious expression in her sharp black eyes—a look which might have set Oswald thinking had he been observant enough to notice it. But he was deep in the sorrows of Werther, who was fast approaching his final agony, and Cynthia was listening as she had listened that other day in the wood, with her hands lying idle in her lap, and the glossy white linen she had been working upon crumpled in a heap under those idle hands.

'Very nicely Joshua's new shirts will get on at that rate, and she so eager to set about them,' mused Judith as she went back to the shop, with close-locked lips; 'to think that novel-reading and such abominations should flourish in my brother's house. But what else could be expected of such a marriage? Lucky for Joshua if nothing worse comes of it.'

Oswald read on, in nowise disturbed by Miss Haggard's entrance to look for an account-book in

the bureau, or to get her thimble from the chimney-piece. He had come to that scene of abject passion —of self-abandonment and despair—when Werther, having resolved to put an end to his misery, comes in the winter evening to see his idol for the last time. Forgetful of herself for the moment, Charlotte reproaches him for coming. She shrinks from the idea of being alone with him, and recovers her self-possession with an effort. She seats herself at her harpsichord, and begins a minuet; then asks Werther to read to her his own translation of a part of Ossian, which he brought her a few days ago. Perhaps no scene in the wide range of sentimental fiction surpasses this in restrained power, in suppressed passion. Not a whisper, not a thought of impurity sullies the picture from the first line to the last: there is only a fatal, irresistible love.

'She tore herself from him, and in hopeless bewilderment, trembling between love and anger, she cried, "This is the last time, Werther! You must see me no more!" And casting a look full of love upon the wretched one, she fled into the adjoining room, and shut the door behind her. Werther

stretched out his arms after her, but dared not detain her. He lay upon the ground, his head on the sofa, and remained in this position for half an hour, until a sudden noise recalled him to himself. It was the servant, who came to lay the table. He walked up and down the room; and when he found himself alone again, went to Charlotte's door, and called in a low voice, "Lotte, Lotte!—only one word —one farewell!" There was no answer. He waited, and knocked, and waited again; then tore himself away, crying, "Farewell, Lotte! Farewell for ever!"'

Cynthia sat listening with dilated eyes and hands tightly clasped, as if the whole scene were reality—as if she could see Werther there at her feet, grovelling on the ground. There stood the open harpsichord at which Charlotte had been playing. The vivid picture shaped itself before her eyes. The winter evening and home-like fire-lit room, the hopeless sinner lying there unpitied and alone, the suicide's dark resolve in his mind; and Charlotte knew not his fatal intention. She refused him the poor comfort of a last farewell. No hand

was stretched out to save him. It was too awful a picture.

Cynthia clasped her hands before her face, and burst into tears. In the next moment Oswald was on his knees beside her, trying to unclasp those small nervous hands.

'You pity *him*,' he cried passionately; 'pity me, then, for I suffer as he suffered; I love as he loved, and yet have courage to live, and to go on fighting with an invincible passion — though I feel the struggle is vain—and to try to be happy with another; yes, to hold firmly to the tie which once promised happiness, and which now means only bondage. Pity me, Cynthia, pity *me;* not that poor shadow in the book, who lived and suffered, and is dead and at rest; for there was such a man. Pity me, Cynthia; for I have loved you, and have been fighting against that love ever since that sweet time before my father's death, when you came to his sick-bed as an angel of mercy, and brought woe unutterable to me.'

He had poured forth his confession in a torrent of words not to be arrested by Cynthia's choked

sobs or look of horror, or the pleading gesture of her tremulous hands.

'Oswald, how can you be so cruel?'

'Cruel! Is it cruel to suffer, to be miserable, to know myself the worst and weakest of men, and to hate myself—as I do, Cynthia, from my soul? Do you think I have not struggled? Yes, and conquered myself, after a fashion. I am going to marry Naomi, and we are to be a happy couple,—as married couples go nowadays—happier than nine out of ten, perhaps; for, at least, I can admire and respect my wife; and I once believed I loved her, before I knew you and the hidden depths of my own heart, and the meaning of that word "love." Yes, we are going to be vastly happy. The builders are doing wonders for our house; and we shall be thought much of and looked up to by the neighbourhood. I may keep a pack of hounds very likely by and by, and teach my wife to ride across country. I am not going to shoot myself, as Werther did.'

'Why did you read that book to me?' asked Cynthia, with a piteous accent that thrilled him.

It sounded like an admission of weakness—a faint cry of despair.

'Why?' he cried, trying to take her hands in both his own. 'Can't you understand why? Because it is my own story; because it was my only way of telling you my love, and I burned to tell you. It was an irresistible longing. I could not keep silence any longer. Somehow, in some language, if not in plainest speech, I must tell you. And now bid me die, my Charlotte, and I will slay myself, like Werther. Only say to me, Life would be easier for all of us if thou wert dead, and I will not live another day to disturb your placid existence. I am your slave, dearest, your abject obedient slave!'

'If you are,' said Cynthia, trembling violently, and paler than the wood anemones she had gathered to deck the old Squire's sick-room, 'if you are, you will obey me. Never speak to me again as you have spoken to-day; forget that you have ever been so wicked. Ask your Saviour to give you a better heart, and respect my dear husband and his daughter.'

Before Oswald could answer honest Sally entered

with the big mahogany tea-tray, knowing no more of the thundercloud of passion in the atmosphere than the maid who laid the supper in the story of Werther. Mr. Pentreath had risen from his knees to pace the room after that last speech of his, and there was no extraordinary picture offered to the eye of the handmaiden. Cynthia folded her work even more carefully than usual, but with hands that trembled sorely. She smoothed the white linen garment which had progressed so slightly towards completion this afternoon, and laid it in its allotted place, and took her stand by the window, watching for her husband's return. She tried to seem at her ease, but not the faintest tinge of colour relieved the absolute pallor of her face. Strangely was that face changed from the radiant countenance that had welcomed Joshua Haggard at Penmoyle one little year ago.

Oswald walked up and down the parlour while Sally set out the homely feast—a big loaf in an iron tray, a brown butter-pot of Wedgewood's ware, a dish of lettuce and overgrown radishes. Anon appeared Miss Haggard; and had either Oswald or Cynthia

been in an observant mood, they might have remarked that the industrious Judith had not paid as much attention as usual to her afternoon toilet. The corkscrew curls were somewhat roughened, the large mosaic brooch, which she was wont to put on by way of evening dress, was missing.

'I think I'll go and have a look at the builders,' said Oswald, taking up his hat. 'I'll come round again in the evening, perhaps, and see how Naomi is.'

No one attempted to hinder his going; so, after a brief adieu to the two ladies, he departed, leaving Werther lying on the little round table by the window. Cynthia took up the volume, and turned eagerly to the page at which he had left off reading.

'Ah!' sighed Miss Haggard, 'that's the worst of novel reading. It grows upon people.'

Cynthia neither heeded nor heard. Her thoughts were with the suicide who was roaming bareheaded in the winter night, outside the gates of the little town, not knowing whither or how long he wandered.

Joshua came in while his wife was standing with the open book in her hand, absorbed, unconscious of his entrance.

'Why, little one, how pale you are!' he said, in that gentler tone which his voice assumed unwittingly whenever he spoke to his wife. 'I missed your welcoming look as I came across the street.'

'There's too much novel reading in this family,' snapped Judith. 'You mustn't expect things to go on as they ought, if you let the young Squire bring bad books into your house.'

'This is not a bad book!' cried Cynthia indignantly. 'It is a beautiful book!'

'I say that it is a bad book!' answered Judith fiercely. 'And I've good reason to know it—a book that puts bad thoughts into people's heads. Gainsay me if you dare, Mrs. Haggard!'

Cynthia's white face turned from her dumbly. What did she guess—what had she overheard? Something assuredly. Deepest shame took possession of Joshua's wife. She felt the burden of unspeakable guilt—she who was only the passive object of an unauthorised passion.

'Why, Judith, Cynthia, what is this! Who would dare to bring a wicked book into my house; my son that is soon to be, above all? And if he were

capable of doing such a shameful thing, would my wife read the book?'

'It is not wicked,' said Cynthia, handing him the offending *Werther*. 'It is a story of sorrow—not wickedness. If stories are to be written at all, they must tell of sorrow—and human weakness, and sinfulness. Even the Bible tells us that life is made up of these.'

'Very much so,' remarked Judith. 'There's nothing the Bible says about human nature's wickedness that human nature doesn't faithfully carry out.'

Joshua took the book and glanced at it helplessly. He was not able to take a bird's-eye view of plot and style, swoop upon a catchword here and there, and straightway made up his mind that the book was altogether vile, after the manner of certain modern critics. He turned the leaves thoughtfully, saw a story told in a series of letters, much talk of the beauties of Nature, a little philosophy, some mention of a country pastor and children—their innocent gambols in rustic gardens, their affection for a kind elder sister, bread-and-butter, village life, a pastoral

air altogether: not a bad book assuredly, decided Joshua.

'I do not think, my dear Judith, that you are a very acute judge of literature,' he said mildly.

'Perhaps not,' assented Miss Haggard, with a faint moan. 'But I hope I am a tolerable judge of human nature.'

'I can trust my future son's honour for not bringing any ill-chosen book into my house; and I can trust my wife's purity well enough to know that it would revolt against anything evil.'

'Nothing like trustfulness in this life,' remarked Judith sententiously, as she took up the teapot.

Now a general proposition—indisputable in its nature though vague in its drift—flung out in this way, has a tendency to instil disquiet into the most tranquil mind. There was not much in the words, but the tone meant a great deal; most of all, a kind of scornful pity. It was like that remark of Iago's anent Michael Cassio's honesty—the plainest, most straightforward observation; yet dropping the poison seed of doubt into the heart of the listener.

Joshua Haggard looked at his sister's pursed-up

lips wonderingly, and then at his wife's pale face, in which there was an expression that was new to him.

Great heavens! what did it mean? Not guilt; not the lightest taint of evil? No; he could never believe the faintest shadow of evil of his beloved—not even the most venial deceit, the smallest double-dealing. She was the purest of the pure—pure as the saintly damsels of old—the women who ministered to the apostles in the sweet early dawn of Christianity. He could admit her to be no less pure than these—as white a soul—unsullied by human frailty. He had preached the sinfulness of the human heart—it was the very keystone of his creed—a sinful humanity in need of being called and regenerated, chosen and purified, redeemed by a vicarious sacrifice. But here he was false to his own theology: he would not admit of original sin in this one pure soul. Love had issued his imperious edict, like a papal bull, and this one woman was to be without sin.

'My love, you are trembling,' said Joshua, taking his wife's cold hand, after a long and earnest

scrutiny of the pale sad face. 'There must be something amiss in the book if it has agitated you so.'

'It is a very sorrowful story,' she faltered; 'I could not help crying—at the end.'

'Oswald must bring you no more books to make you unhappy. I heard you all laughing pleasantly one afternoon when he was reading some Scotch book about an old gentleman and a dog. He must bring you only pleasant books. In a world where there is so much real sorrow, it is foolish and even wrong to waste our tears upon story-books. That is one reason why I have always tried to keep such books out of my house.'

'I will never read such stories again,' said Cynthia earnestly. 'Only tell me how to please you, and I will be obedient in all things.'

Judith sighed audibly. It was a way she had at times, and always exercised a depressing influence upon her family circle.

'Is there anything wrong, Judith?' inquired the minister.

'No, brother; it's only my chest.'

This was her invariable answer; but as medical

science had never yet discovered anything amiss in this region—not so much as a brief attack of indigestion—the reply was generally accepted as a sort of formula, and her sighing was taken to mean something which Miss Haggard did not choose to communicate.

'My dearest, you have always been obedient,' said Joshua, pressing his wife's little hand; 'I have never been dissatisfied with you. But I do not like to see you low-spirited about a foolish book, written by some weak-minded German,' said Joshua, with a sublime ignorance as to the pretentions of the great Wolfgang.

'Try me with some hard thing,' exclaimed Cynthia, with increasing earnestness; 'put my gratitude and affection to the proof. Do I forget what you have done for me—how you saved me from heathen ignorance? how I owe you all that I am and all that I hope to be? *Could* I be ungrateful to you, my benefactor and my deliverer?'

Had Judith Haggard been a student of Shakespeare, she would have here quoted Ophelia's remark upon the Player-queen inwardly or audibly—

'Methinks the lady doth protest too much!'

But as her sole notion of the poet was that he had been rather a low and loose-lived person who wrote plays, and glorified much drinking of sack and canary as a cardinal virtue, she relieved her feelings with another sigh, deeper than the last.

'Don't mind me, brother,' she said; 'it's only my chest.'

Joshua neither heard the sigh nor the excuse; his eyes were fixed upon his wife's white face, down which the gathering tears rolled slowly.

'Ungrateful, my love!' he cried; 'have I ever claimed gratitude from you? My part has been to thank God for having given me so dear a companion. Only be happy, my darling; that is the sole obedience I ask from you. Let no foolish fancies out of books disturb your peace of mind. God has given us real happiness, dear; let us be thankful for it and value it, lest the cloud should come upon us because we have made light of the sunshine.'

He drew her to him and kissed her tenderly; and in that hour at least there was no shadow of distrust in his mind.

CHAPTER XI.

'AND ALL IS DROSS THAT IS NOT HELENA.'

It was some time before Oswald saw his betrothed after that last reading of *Werther;* and the book remained a broken story for Naomi, who knew not the issue of Werther's fatal love. Cynthia carried the volume up to her own room, and read it, and wept over it in secret, and then hid it under the little stock of ribbons and collars and feminine prettinesses—all of the simplest, most puritanical kind—which she had acquired since she had been Joshua Haggard's wife. She put the book away out of sight, as if it were a guilty thing, feeling that it had brought her face to face with a guilty secret. But for the book those wicked words of Oswald's might never have been spoken. The sad, the awful inexpiable guilt would have existed all the same in the depths of two erring hearts; but it might never have found a voice. Werther had given form and

language to that mysterious and sinful passion—bitterest proof of poor humanity's ingrained iniquity.

'Not by ourselves can we escape sin,' she cried, on her knees, in abject self-abasement. 'We are nothing of ourselves: not even faithful to the most sacred ties—not even true to our own affections—not even pure or constant. Only by Thee, O Redeemer!—only by Thee can we escape the snares our erring hearts set for us; only through Thee can we break loose from the bondage of original sin. O, pity him, spotless Saviour—pity this helpless sinner; pity me, for I love him.' She was not afraid to carry this secret sorrow, sinful as it was, to the foot of the cross. Her husband's theology had taught her that Calvary was the sinner's altar—his temple of expiation; the threshold of heaven, on which all guilty hearts could lay their burdens down, and pass, purified from earthly stain, and liberated from earthly chains, through the golden gate beyond it. The deeper the guilt, the surer welcome for the penitent.

Cynthia's guilt was but a thought—a fond, weak yielding to a dream of impossible happiness; a sin-

ful regret for the things that might have been. She had not stood firmly against the insidious approach of the tempter; she had suffered him to steal upon her footsteps unawares; she had not shut her eyes and refused to see the dangerous, dazzling vision. Passion was an unknown element in this purely sentimental and poetic nature. Love for Cynthia could never mean storm and fever, guilt and ruin; but it might mean corroding remorse, a slow and silent despair.

When had she first discovered that something amiss in her placid life—that little rift in the lute which made life's music dumb? Closest self-examination would have scarcely enabled her to answer that question. It might be, perhaps, that on the morning when Oswald parted from her at her husband's door—in the blank sorrow of his face, with its look of mute appeal, in the tears he shed upon her hand as he clasped it in his own—she had faintly understood a secret which was to become plainer to her by and by. The thought, vague though it was at first, had brought sorrow. She had felt a restraint in the presence of Naomi's lover, and had striven to

avoid him. But the days in which she did not see him, seemed desolate and empty; and then, not weighing the consequences or meaning of her acts, she weakly yielded to the desire to be in his company, and allowed herself to be the companion of Naomi's walks, the sharer of her lover's attentions. This was the sin she now looked back upon as the black spot in her life—this was when she had suffered the tempter to overtake her steps, to walk by her side.

O happy fatal afternoons in wood or wilderness—on the hills—by the malachite and purple sea! She could see the bright face looking up at her; she could hear the low thrilling voice reading sweet sad verse that seemed to speak straight to her heart—to have been written and meant only for her: she could see and hear the earthly tempter even now, in this hour of penitence and grief.

'O, if I had never seen you, if I had never known you, I should have been innocent and true all the days of my life; worthy of Joshua's noble heart.'

She could pray no more. She sat upon the ground, lost in foolish memories, recalling her first

days at Combhaven, and all the peaceful time, before she had given up her soul to this guilty dream. She remembered that autumn afternoon, the first time she saw Oswald—she standing by the hearth, with her bonnet in her hand; he coming in at the door.

'And he was nothing to me,' she thought wonderingly. 'If he had died that night, I should only have been sorry for Naomi's sake.'

She had thought him handsome—different in every way from all other men she had ever seen—a new creature. He was like a picture that Joshua had shown her in an old country-house they went to see in their brief honeymoon—the portrait of a young man in dark-green velvet clothes of a curious fashion, with fair hair falling on his shoulders, and a melancholy look in his eyes. How often she had seen that melancholy look in Oswald's eyes, after the Squire's death, and had known only too well that it was not grief for his father that made him sad!

How gradually it had crept into her heart, this weak, wicked love! Had it come like a bold assailant she could have repulsed it; but sweetly, slowly, gently, like the tender dawn of a summer morning,

this new light had overspread the sky of life. How should she bear her life without it!

'Duty, duty!' she cried, wresting herself from this web of foolish memories. 'O, let me remember all I owe my husband; let me remember how I worshipped him one little year ago: what a grace and honour I counted it to be chosen by him. I loved him, because he was the best and wisest of men. He *is* best and wisest—kindest, truest. Whom have I ever known equal to him?'

When Naomi went down to the parlour, a little later than usual, on the morning after that last reading of *Werther*—languid still from yesterday's headache—she found a letter from Oswald on the chimneypiece. Cynthia was sitting at work by the window—just where *he* had sat yesterday. Judith was washing the breakfast cups and saucers in a little crockery pan which she was accustomed to bring into the parlour for that purpose.

'Dearest,—I have made up my mind quite suddenly to go to London, and inquire about Arnold's ship. It seems such a strange thing that I have had

no answer to my letters, and I am getting really uneasy. I shall go to Lloyds'—or whatever the right place may be to obtain information about a ship in the merchant service. Forgive me for going away so suddenly and without waiting to say good-bye. An irresistible impulse took hold of me. I shall only stay long enough to make all needful inquiries and to take a hasty look at the City; and I shall write to tell you how I get on. God bless you, dear, and good-bye!—Your always affectionate

'OSWALD.'

Naomi read the letter twice over, surprised at this sudden impulse in Oswald, who was not subject to impulses, or at least not subject to carrying out their promptings when they prompted immediate action. He was rather of a dreamy temperament, never doing anything to-day which he could possibly put off till to-morrow.

She read the letter a third time, aloud to Cynthia.

'Did he say anything about this yesterday?' she asked. 'Had he any idea of going to London?'

'I think not,' answered Cynthia, working steadily. O blessed mechanical click-click of the needle, which went on with its measured paces while the pulses of the heart throbbed so stormily. Naomi gave a little sigh as she folded the letter. It was hard to lose him for an indefinite time, were it ever so short. And her wedding-day seemed so far off now. The neglected old Grange no longer awaited her with its sober old-world look—the look it had worn since her infancy. Confusion had fallen upon the old house, and Naomi felt as if she could have no part in the new house which was to arise from this chaos. Money was being spent recklessly to make the grave old mansion fit for a fine lady; and Naomi knew that it was not in her to become a fine lady. All the money in the world would never make her like Mrs. Carew of the Knoll, who wore rouge, and drove a curricle; or like Miss Donnisthorpe, the daughter of the master of the hounds, who hunted the innocent red deer, in a short green habit, with a gold band round her velvet hunting-cap.

'If he would only keep to the old simple ways,' she thought, looking back at the departed Squire's

miserly plainness of living with a touch of regret, 'I am sure we should be much happier; he would spend his money in doing good.'

She knew, by the experience of one who had succoured and cared for the poor, all the sad details of that dark picture which lies behind the fair outside of country life. That lovely landscape, rich in its variety of colour as the Queen's regalia, is the theatre in which many a drama of sin and suffering, guiltless poverty and unmerited woe, has to be acted. Yonder cottage, whose thatched roof makes so pretty a feature in the view, shelters starvation: a mother toiling to feed her children, while their father lies in jail for—a rabbit. Pinched faces, untimely wrinkles, meet the traveller in those delightful lanes where the wild apple and the clustering elder suggest to the poetic mind a land of milk, and honey, and pomegranates—faces marked with the brand of premature care, defiled by the cunning that is engendered of childish struggles with tyrants and taskmasters, and a hard, inexorable fate. Not in fetid alleys and festering London back slums only is man's fight with difficulty a bitter and crushing battle; but here,

even where earth is a paradise and the untainted sky an Italian blue, man starves and perishes, and learns to curse the unequal destiny that gives his master all, and him nothing.

Naomi knew what poverty meant in a rural district; and she longed for the power to help and improve, and to use the knowledge which experience had given her. She had talked to Oswald of the labourers' homes on his estate—hovels rather than houses—and had gently urged the need for improvement. He had put her off lightly, in his pleasant yielding way: so full of grace and beauty in her sight that she forgot the weakness it indicated.

'It shall be done, dear; "The sooner, sweet, for you," as Othello says. We will do wonders for the poor things. The Exeter architect shall make a plan—after we are married. You must let me finish the Grange first, and then I will do anything you like; but I can't take the builder off that till his work is done.' As if there were no other builder in the world!

Oswald was in London trying to find his Lethe

in the somewhat prosaic distractions of that capital; —not the London of to-day, with its Viaduct and Embankment, and houses as tall as those of old Edinburgh and Paris; its innumerable railway-stations, and theatres, and restaurants, and music-halls; but a city of narrower streets and more jovial manners. He knew no one, and put up at the busy commercial hotel at which the Western coach deposited him, taking no trouble to seek a more refined habitation. He made his inquiries about his brother's ship, and, after some trouble, found out the last port she had touched at in the China seas. Yet this was not much: for Arnold might have exchanged to another ship for anything Oswald knew to the contrary. But to gain intelligence about his absent brother had not been Mr. Pentreath's only business in London, or even his chief reason for going there. He went thither in quest of forgetfulness—to cure himself, were it curable, of a passion that threatened to be fatal at once to peace of mind and honour. He had torn himself away from Combhaven with a wrench, thinking that to turn his back upon Cynthia might be to forget her; but, alas for

youth's constancy to a forbidden dream! the sweet face followed him to the crowded city, and harassed him by day, and held him awake at night; the soft blue eyes betrayed love's sad secret; the tremulous lips seemed to him to murmur: 'Yes, dearest, I love and pity you; though it can never be—though we are parted in life and eternity, I love—I pity—I deplore.'

Not quite in vain had he loved her if she but loved him in return; though all hopes, dreams, delights that love could give — were it ever so erring—must be here laid down: a solemn sacrifice to duty and honour. Yes, there was much comfort—nay, more than comfort, a rapture that thrilled him—in knowing that he was loved. And he did most assuredly know it, though no admission had fallen from Cynthia's lips. Their spirits had touched, as flame touches flame, but a moment—swift as the quivering arrows of fire that flash and fade in the instant; yet the touch was a revelation. He did not doubt that she loved him.

He had never meant to speak of his love. This he repeated to himself deprecatingly in his hours of

remorse. Passion had forced his secret from him, and he despised himself for the confession that had dishonoured him. He had meant to speak only through Werther; finding a morbid delight in dwelling upon the record of sufferings so like his own, half assured that Cynthia understood and recognised his passion veiled in the words of another; and then impulse and emotion had been too strong for him, and he had given loose to the desire of his heart and disgraced himself for ever in his own eyes, and in the sight of the woman he loved.

'She could not look upon me without loathing after that wretched scene,' he told himself. Yet the vision of Cynthia which he carried with him everywhere did not regard him with loathing, but with a tender pity, a sad, immeasurable love.

He tried to steep himself in London dissipations, knowing about as much of them as a baby. If he could have fallen in with the mohawks of the day—the gentlemen who went to Epsom races in a hearse, and wrenched off harmless citizens' knockers, or plucked out their bell-wires; who drank porter with hackney coachmen and their watermen, and made

bosom friends of prize-fighters—he would perchance have enrolled himself in that band of choice spirits, and tried to discover a new Lethe in the porter-pot, wherein the Corinthian Tom of the period was generally so fortunate as speedily to find that oblivion which goes by the name of Death. But Oswald Pentreath had no introduction to this patrician set, and was fain to seek for distraction in such simple pleasures as Vauxhall, and the theatres, where he found something at every turn which reminded him of himself and of Cynthia.

Sometimes a face that had been sweet and fair flashed past him under the coloured lamps in the Vauxhall groves—bright with artificial hues—and in its venal smile dimly recalling Cynthia's innocent beauty; sometimes a face upon the stage reminded him of hers, or a tone of voice in some young actress thrilled him like hers. Forget her! Everything in life was associated with her. He could not even remember what life had been like before he loved her.

He saw all that London could show him—parks, streets, theatres, gambling-houses, racecourses, folly, extravagance, vacuity—but found no forgetfulness.

Nay, his passion grew and strengthened in absence. The aching void in his heart went with him everywhere. At the play, when the house was roaring at Tom and Jerry, and the Charlies were carried off bodily in their rickety old watchboxes, Oswald sat staring blankly. His thoughts were in the parlour at Combhaven, acting that foolish scene over again —living in the light of Cynthia's eyes—draining deep delight from every look—however sad, however reproachful—which told him he was beloved.

He did not yield himself up to despair without a struggle—which was a manly struggle for one whom Nature had cast in no heroic mould. He wrestled with himself, and tried to make a stand against the tempter, and had it in his mind to thrust Joshua's wife out of his heart, and to be faithful to Joshua's daughter. He would go back to Combhaven in a month or so, regenerated; and would hurry on his marriage, and begin a new life as a useful and worthy member of society.

'Arnold may be home by that time,' he thought; 'and the delight of seeing him again will make me forget everything.'

In the mean while, he wrote twice a week to Naomi, decorous and amiable letters, describing all he saw, and telling nothing of his feelings or impressions—hardly one word of himself from beginning to end. Poor Naomi read and re-read the letters, and puzzled herself sorely about them. He seemed to be enjoying himself, for he was always going to theatres and operas and races; and he was staying in London longer than he had intended, which proved that he was pleased with what he saw. Naomi was contented to bear the pain of severance, for the sake of his pleasure; but to be parted from him was a sharper pain than she could have thought possible before he went. Life was so empty without him! She had her father—always the first in her esteem, she had told herself; she had all her old home duties and home ties; but Oswald's absence took the sunshine and colour out of everything.

CHAPTER XII.

'IT WAS THY LOVE PROVED FALSE AND FRAIL.'

A CLOUD had fallen upon that quiet household at Combhaven. A sharper pain than Naomi's sense of loss had crept into the breast of Naomi's father, and gnawed it in secret, while the strong man kept silence, ashamed of his suffering—nay, angry at the human weakness which made it possible for him so to suffer.

That little scene with Cynthia—that unexplained mystery about the book called *Werther*—had not been without its influence upon Joshua Haggard's mind. He might have forgotten it, and gone on trusting implicitly—as it was his nature to trust where he confided at all—had he been true to his own instincts; but this privilege—the melancholy privilege of being happy and deceived—had not been allowed him. Judith had hinted, and whispered, and looked, and insinuated, and, without committing herself to any direct statement, had contrived to

poison her brother's mind with a shapeless suspicion of his wife's purity.

Cynthia had drooped somewhat after that evening on which she sobbed out her despair upon her husband's breast. The pale cheek had not regained its wild-rose bloom; the sweet blue eyes had grown dull and languid. The young wife looked like one who sickened under the burden of some secret sorrow. She was not strong enough to suppress the outward signs of a heart ill at ease.

Joshua saw the change; at first wondered at it, and then, enlightened by Judith's hints, began to suspect.

Cynthia was not happy. It was no bodily sickness which oppressed her, but a secret grief.

Was it that she regretted her marriage with him—that she had chosen him hastily, mistaking religious fervour for love? This seemed likely enough.

'How should she love me?' he asked himself. 'A man more than twice her age; grave—full of cares for serious things. Is it natural that she should find happiness in my society or in the life

she leads here? Naomi is different; she has been brought up to this quiet life—to see all things in the same sober light. Cynthia was a wanderer, used to motion and variety—to crowds and noise. How can she help it if the longing for the old gipsy life comes back to her? How can I blame her if she wearies of my dull home?'

This is how he would have explained the change to himself; but Judith's oracular sentences hinted at something darker.

'What is it that you mean, Judith?' he asked one day, with a burst of anger; 'you and my wife speak fairly enough to each other's faces, and seem to live peacefully together; but there is something lurking in your mind—there is something underneath all this smoothness. Is it Christianlike to deal in hints and dark looks?'

'I should think it was Christianlike to stand by my brother,' answered Judith, with her injured air, 'and to consider him before everybody.'

'Is it a sign of consideration for me to speak unkindly of my wife?'

'What have I said that is unkind? Perhaps it

might be kindness to say more. There's things that can't go on without bringing misery to more than you, brother; but it isn't my business to talk about 'em if you've no eyes to see 'em for yourself.'

'What do you mean, woman?'

'Yes; things must have come to a pretty pass when my only brother, that I've toiled for and served faithfully all my life, calls me names. A minister, too, who preaches against bad language. But I knew what it would be when that young woman crossed this threshold. Good-bye family affection! The man who is led away by a pretty face turns his back upon blood-relations. He's bound to follow where his new fancy leads him.'

With these random arrows of speech did Miss Haggard harass her victim and relieve her own feelings.

'Judith, do you want to drive me mad?' he cried, with exasperation, 'or to make me think that you are fit for a madhouse yourself? How has my wife offended you? What evil have you ever seen in her?'

He stood with his back against the parlour-door,

facing his sister, with a resolute look in his dark eyes—resolute even to fierceness, which told her that a crisis had come. She would be obliged to speak out; and to speak out was the very last thing she desired. Never before had she seen that sombre fire in Joshua's dark eyes. She quailed before the unknown demon she had raised.

'What is amiss?' he demanded savagely; 'how has my wife sinned against purity, or against me?'

'I am not accusing her of sin,' faltered Judith. 'You shouldn't be so hot-tempered, brother; it isn't becoming in a Christian minister. I do not accuse her of sin; but there's foolishness which brings young women to the threshold of sin; and, once there, it is easy to cross over to fire and brimstone. I say that a girl of nineteen is no wife for a man of your age; that Providence must have meant her for a trial of your patience; that's what I've always thought and shall always say, as willingly before her face as behind her back.'

'Is this all you have to say? You might have said as much the night I brought my wife home. Is this the upshot of all your dark looks and insinua-

tions? You have kept me on thorns for the last three weeks; and, driven into a corner, you can only beat about the bush like this.'

His scornful tone stung her. To be ridiculed—to be made of no account in her brother's household—was more than Judith Haggard could bear. Whatever wealth of affection there was in her nature had been given to Joshua. He was the one man she believed in and honoured, even when least respectful in her attitude towards him. She could not tamely see him wronged; and her jealousy of Cynthia was quick to suspect and imagine wrong. She had seen and heard enough to give force and meaning to her suspicions; and her bosom had been labouring with the weight of that secret knowledge. She wanted to tell Joshua—she wanted not to tell him. The secret gave her a sense of power. It was as if she held a thunderbolt which she might launch at any moment on the heads of the household; but the bolt once launched and the domestic sky darkened, her power would be gone. Pity for Joshua she had none, although she loved him. He had wronged her love too deeply in marrying a nameless girl. It would

do her good to see him suffer through his wife. She would stand by him afterwards—stand by him and console him, comfort him with her love, instead of Cynthia's. But Providence—and Judith as an instrument of Providence—meant him to suffer this ordeal.

'You've no call to make light of me,' she said; 'I'm not one to speak without authority. I can hold my tongue, as I've held it for the last twelvemonth. Do you want me to speak plainly? Do you want me to say all I know?'

'All—to the last word,' said Joshua, livid with rage.

'Don't turn round upon me afterwards and say it would have been better if I'd kept my counsel.'

'Say your say, woman, and make an end of it.'

'Well, brother, I've seen a change in Mr. Pentreath ever since his father's death; absent looks, and smothered sighs, and restlessness, and no pleasure in life. Grief for his father, you'll say, perhaps; but is it likely he'd give way like that for an old man, that kept him short of money, and hadn't anybody's good word? It isn't in nature.'

'Who made you a judge of nature? But go on.'

'Well, brother, I had my own ideas, and I kept 'em to myself, and should have so kept 'em as long as I lived, if I'd had no stronger cause for suspicion. But when I see a young man on his knees at a young woman's feet, and hear him asking her to pity him because he's miserable for love of her, and threatening to shoot himself, and the young woman sobbing as if her heart would break all the time—and that young woman my brother's wife—when things came to such a pass as this, I think it's my duty to speak.'

'Lies!—lies!' gasped Joshua. 'You see my happiness, and envy me! You hate my wife because she is lovely, as you never were—passionately loved, as you never were.'

Judith laughed hysterically.

'I don't know about beauty,' she said; 'but I had a high colour and jet-black hair, with a natural curl, when I was a young woman—and that used to be thought good looks enough for any girl in my time—and I might have married a hundred and fifty acres of land and a flour-mill. But I'm sorry to see

you so beside yourself with passion, Joshua, because I speak plainly for your own good.'

'Is it for my good to tell me lies? My wife listening to Oswald Pentreath's wicked love! No—I'll never believe it.'

'Turn it over in your own mind a little more before you call your only sister a liar. Have you forgotten the last afternoon Mr. Pentreath was here—when Naomi was lying down with a sick headache, and those two—Mrs. Haggard and the young Squire—were alone together from dinner till tea. And you came home and found your wife all in a flutter and as white as a sheet of paper; and I accused her to her face of reading a wicked book; and you turned against me to take her part; and she burst into tears in the middle of tea, and told you she was grateful to you and would do her duty by you. What was that but a guilty conscience? Why, a mole could have seen through it! But a man of your age, who marries a young woman for the sake of her pretty face, is blinder than the blindest mole. He has not eyes to see anything but the prettiness.'

Joshua wiped the sweat-drops from his forehead

with a broad muscular hand that shook like a leaf. Never had his manhood been so shaken—never in all the trials of his early life, when to hold fast by his thorny path had cost him many a struggle, had he felt the hot blood surging in his brain as it surged to-day. There was a fiery cloud before his eyes. He could scarcely see his sister's face, looking at him full of angry eagerness, intent to prove her own case, to assert her own dignity, and with but little consideration for his anguish.

'Judith,' he said falteringly—and that strong voice of his so rarely faltered that its weakness had a touch of deepest pathos—'you are my own and only sister. I cannot think that you would tell me lies on purpose to make me miserable. Forgive me for what I said just now. No, I cannot believe my sister a liar. I will not believe my wife unfaithful to me by so much as a thought. But this young man is a weak vessel. Tell me—plainly—all you saw and heard.'

'That's easily told. He had been reading that book to her—what's his name—Werther. I went in and out to fetch my thimble and suchlike, and

whenever I went in it was the same story—"Didst thou but know how I love thee," and "Charlotte, it is decided—I must die;" and such rubbish. And there sat your wife, with her work crumpled up in her lap, staring straight at him with tears in her eyes. It was close upon tea-time, and I was going in again when I heard something that stopped me. The door stood a little way ajar—it's an old box-lock, and the catch is always giving way, as you know, Joshua—and I waited outside just to find out what it all meant; for I felt that I was bound to do that much by my duty to you. I could just see into the room. He was on his knees, holding her hands, and she sobbing as if her heart would break. He told her how he loved her, and asked her to pity him; and she never said him nay, only went on crying, and presently told him he was cruel, and O, why did he read such a book to her? Because it was his own story, he said, and the only way he could find of telling her his love.'

'And she did not cry out against such iniquity?' cried Joshua; 'she did not reprove him for such wickedness—rise up before him in her

dignity as an offended woman and my true and loyal wife?'

'I heard myself called in the shop just at that moment, and I was obliged to go,' answered Judith. 'When I came back to the parlour Sally was laying the tea-things.'

'I will answer for my wife's truth and honour,' said Joshua firmly. 'I will pledge myself that she repulsed and upbraided this guilty young man as he deserved—that she looks upon his wicked passion with abhorrence. That was why she looked so pale—shocked to the heart, my gentle one; that was why she clung to me so piteously, seeking sanctuary in my affection. My lily! no villain shall sully thy purity while I am near to shield thee! My dearest! has the tempter assailed thee so soon, sin's poisoned breath so soon tarnished thy soul's whiteness? I will love thee all the more, guard thee more closely, honour thee more deeply, because thou hast been in danger!'

Judith stared at her brother in dumb amazement. Against such infatuation as this the voice of reason was powerless. It almost tempted her to believe in

witchcraft—a superstition by no means extinct in this Western world. Judith had put the thought behind her hitherto, as a delusion of the dark ages unworthy of a strong-minded woman. But here, surely, was a case of demoniac possession, an example of something more foolish than mortal folly.

'But as for him,' continued Joshua, with clenched fist, 'for the tempter—the would-be seducer—he shall never cross this threshold again; and let him beware how he crosses my path, lest I should slay him in my righteous rage, as Moses slew the Egyptian.'

'And Naomi's engagement,' suggested Judith timidly. There was a power in her brother's look which awed her.

'Naomi's engagement is cancelled from this hour. My daughter shall marry no double-dealer, swearing to be true to her at God's altar with lips that are defiled by the avowal of love for another man's wife. My daughter shall go unmarried to her grave rather than be wife of such a man, were his place the highest in the land.'

'It was a very grand match for her,' said Judith,

with a propitiating air; 'but for my part I never saw happiness come from an unequal marriage, and I've seen many such in my time. But I'm afraid Naomi will take it to heart.'

'Poor child!' sighed the father. 'Is it my sin that I have brought this sorrow upon her? How could I know that her lover would prove so base? Poor child! she must bear her burden—she must carry her cross.'

He was deadly pale; and now that the angry light had gone out of his eyes, his face had a faded look, as if the anguish of many years had aged him within the last half-hour.

'I can't but remember what Jabez Long said the day the Dolphin went down: "No good ever came of saving a drowning man; he's bound to do you wrong afterwards." It's come true, you see,' said Judith.

'Do you think I believe that heathen superstition any more because Oswald Pentreath has proved a villain? I thought you had more sense, Judith.'

'Well, I don't say I believe it; but, to say the

least, it's curious. However, I never did think much of young Mr. Pentreath, or of the stock he comes from. But it seems hard upon Naomi. Shall you tell her the reason ?'

'Tell her that a villain has insulted my wife? No, Judith. My daughter will obey me, though I bid her sacrifice her heart's desire, as Jephthah's daughter obeyed when she laid down her life in fulfilment of her father's promise.'

'Ah!' sighed Judith, with suppressed gusto, 'it's a world of trouble.'

She felt more in her element now that things were going wrong, and that she was at the helm once more, in a manner. Her little world had been given over to two girls, and she had felt herself, in her own language, a cipher.

It was hardly in Joshua's nature to be slow to act, however painful the business which duty imposed upon him. On that very evening he found Naomi alone in the wilderness, on her knees before a craggy bank, planting some wild flowers which she had discovered in her afternoon rambles.

She looked up from her clustering ferns and

humble way-side blossoms with a smile, as her father approached; but the troubled expression of his face alarmed her, and she rose quickly and came to him.

'Dear father, is anything wrong?'

She had not seen him since his interview with Judith; and that aged and altered look in his face, which had struck the sister, alarmed the daughter.

'Yes, my dear, there is something very wrong. Providence bids me inflict pain upon one I fondly love—upon you, my Naomi.'

He drew her towards him, looking down at her with tender pity. It seemed very hard that she should suffer—that this young life was so soon to be clouded.

'Dear father, what has happened?' cried Naomi, tremulous in her agitation. 'It is about Oswald! The evening post has just come; you have had a letter—is he ill? Yes, yes, I can see that it is about him!'

'He is well enough, my love; I have heard nothing to the contrary. I am very sorry that he is so dear to you.'

'Why, dear father?'

'Because I have learned lately that he is unworthy of your affection; and I must desire you, as you are my true and obedient daughter, to give up all thought of marrying him.'

The girl's face blanched, her eyelids closed for a moment, and the slender figure swayed against Joshua's arm as if it would have fallen. But only for a moment. Naomi was not made of feeble stuff, nor prone to fainting. She lifted her eyelids, and looked at her father steadily, holding his arm with fingers that tightened upon it almost convulsively in that moment of pain.

'What have you heard against him, father, and from whom?' she asked resolutely. 'You are bound to tell me that, in common justice. It is my duty to obey you, but not blindly. I am not a child; I can bear to know the worst. What has he done, my love, my dearest—too gentle to hurt a worm—what evil thing has he done that you should turn against him?'

'That I cannot tell you, Naomi; and in this matter you must obey me blindly as a child. He

has sinned; and his sin proves him alike false and feeble—a broken reed, a man not to be relied on—unworthy of a woman's trust. Naomi, believe me, your father, who never deceived you, that if I inflict pain upon you to-day, in forbidding this marriage, I spare you ten thousandfold of misery in days to come. It is not possible that you could be happy as Oswald's wife!'

'Let me be the judge of that. It is my venture—it is my happiness that is at stake. Let me be the judge. What is his sin?'

'Again I say I cannot tell you. You must trust me and obey me, Naomi, or you cease to be my daughter. Oswald Pentreath will never cross my threshold again with my sanction. I shall never more speak to him in friendship.'

'Father, is this Christianlike?'

'It is my duty to myself as a man.'

'How has he offended you?'

'By his sin.'

'But he has not sinned against me,' said Naomi piteously. 'Why am I to renounce him?'

'He has sinned against you and against God.'

'If he has sinned, he has so much the more need of my love. Am I to forsake him in his sorrow—I, who would die for him?'

'He does not need your love, Naomi, or desire it. It is for the happiness of both that you should be parted.'

'For his happiness?' faltered Naomi, with a look of acute pain.

It was as if all her vague doubts of the past few months were suddenly condensed into a horrible certainty.

'Do you mean that Oswald has ceased to love me?'

'Yes, Naomi. At the beginning I was doubtful of his stability. I feared that his was a character in which impressions are quick to come and go. I stipulated for delay, in order that your lover's constancy might be tested. The event has proved my doubts but too well grounded.'

'I offered to release him only a little while ago,' said Naomi, 'and he would not be set free. He assured me of his unchanging love.'

'He was a liar!' cried Joshua fiercely; and his

daughter recoiled before the fury in that dark face. Never had she seen such anger there till to-day—never had she believed him capable of such passion. The revelation shocked her; the father whom she so tenderly loved was degraded in her eyes by this un-Christianlike resentment.

'Why are you so angry, father?' she asked pleadingly.

'Because I hate falsehood, treachery, double-dealing, a fair face and a foul heart. I can say no more, Naomi. I have said enough to warn you; it is for you to accept or reject my warning. Marry Oswald Pentreath if you choose; but remember that from the hour of your marriage you cease to be my daughter. I will never acknowledge that man as my son. I will never acknowledge that man's wife as my flesh and blood. It is for you to choose between us.'

'Father, you know I have no choice; you know that you are first—have always held the first place in my heart. There is no one else whose love I could weigh against yours—not even Oswald, though I love him dearly—must love him to the end—love

him all the more for his weakness—for his sorrow. I am your true and loyal daughter, dearest; and I give you up my heart, as I would give up my life—yes, dear father, freely, gladly, for your sake.'

'That's my own brave Naomi! It is for your own welfare, believe me, dearest, however hard the trial may be to bear just now. The man is not true; there could be no happiness for you with him.'

'Do not say anything more against him, father,' pleaded Naomi gently. 'I give him up; but let me honour him as much as I can—let him hold a high place in my thoughts. It is easier to bear the pain of parting from him if I can keep his image in my heart undefiled.'

'I will say no more, Naomi. You will write to him, and tell him your engagement is ended, at my desire. A few decided words will say all that is needful. His own heart will tell him the reason. I do not think that he will question or plead against your decision.'

'I will write, father.'

Joshua folded her in his arms and kissed the pale sad brow, drawn with pain.

'May God bless and comfort you, dearest, and give you joy in this sacrifice!' he said solemnly. 'On my honour, as your father and your pastor, it is for the best.'

And so he left her, standing in her desolated wilderness, from which the beauty had gone forth for ever. Her ferns and hedgerow blossoms smiled at her in the rosy evening light—feathery mosses, trailing periwinkle, opalescent dog-roses steeped in golden glory, purple foxgloves towering from a sea of fern—all the sweet wild things she had gathered together looked at her, and gave her no comfort in this hour of bitter agony. She cast herself, face downward, on the grassy path, and gave herself up, body and soul, to despair.

Yes, she had known it, long ago; he loved her no more. She had tried to put away the thought. She had made her direct appeal to him, and been reassured by his loving reply. But the aching pain had lingered at the bottom of her heart. She had not been happy.

Better so; better, as her father said, to renounce him altogether—to give him back his freedom—than

to let him chain himself in a loveless wedlock. Better anything than the humiliation of an unloved wife.

But this sin which her father spoke of with such deep resentment—this offence which had kindled such unseemly anger in a Christian's breast—what was this deadly and desperate error? Herein lay the bitterest trial of all—to be kept in the dark, not to be able to comfort or succour the sinner.

CHAPTER XIII.

'THE DEEP OF NIGHT IS CREPT UPON OUR TALK.'

JOSHUA proved a true prophet in so far as related to Oswald Pentreath's line of conduct on receipt of his betrothed's letter. To Naomi's sad epistle, renouncing all claim upon him at her father's desire, he answered briefly:

'Your letter has taken me by surprise, dearest; but harsh and sudden as your decision seems, I acquiesce. I know not how your father may have arrived at his estimate of my character, or what has influenced him to desire that our engagement shall be cancelled, but I am willing to abide his sentence. He may be right, perhaps. I am by nature unstable. I am not worthy of so noble a heart as yours. Yet be assured, Naomi, that, although unworthy, I am at least capable of appreciating and admiring your character, as well as a better man. To the end of

my life I shall honour and esteem you. To the end of my life I shall deem you the purest and noblest of women, and think those days of my life happiest in which I loved you best, and when there was no shadow of mistrust between us.

'God bless you, dearest, and farewell! It may be long before I revisit Combhaven, and this may be a lifelong farewell.—Your friend, your servant always,

'Oswald Pentreath.'

'He is grateful to me for letting him go,' thought Naomi, with a touch of bitterness. She could read gratitude for his release between the lines of this letter.

'He might have spared me much pain if he had been more candid,' she thought—'if he had confessed the truth that day I told him of the change I had seen in him.'

She opened the drawer where her wedding-dress lay on the day she received this final letter, the last she could ever expect from Oswald Pentreath. She looked at the pale silken gown with such sorrowful eyes as look upon a corpse. Was it not the dead

corpse of her lost happiness which lay there, with sprigs of rosemary among the folds of its shroud?

'Poor wedding-gown!' she said to herself; 'I shall give it to Lucy Simmonds. Why should it lie and fade in a drawer when it would make her happy? Would it be any comfort to me to look at it in years to come, and remember that I was once young and very happy, fancying myself beloved?'

Lucy Simmonds had been Naomi's favourite pupil in the Sunday school over Little Bethel; an intelligent biblical student, who knew Kings and Chronicles as well as a bishop, and had never been known to confound the miracles of Elijah and Elisha. She had blossomed into womanhood, and was about to unite her fate with that of a promising young butcher—a staunch member of Joshua's congregation.

Naomi folded the dress carefully, and packed it in a large sheet of white paper. The skirts of those days were scanty, and the silk dress did not make a bulky parcel. She wrote a loving letter to her old pupil, and sent the parcel to the widow Simmonds's house that afternoon. The dress might be too good for Lucy's present station, but not for her future

position as the wife of an aspiring butcher. The young matron would wear that pretty gray silk at friendly tea-parties and Christmas gatherings for years to come, and would think affectionately of the donor. It seemed a small thing, this giving away of her wedding-gown; but to Naomi it meant the total surrender of hope. There was nothing left for her in life but duty and her love for her father.

She bore her cross meekly. None could have told how withering a sorrow had passed over her young life. There was a curious compound of pride and humbleness in her nature. She accepted her lot humbly, as a trial which was but her portion of humanity's common burden; but she was too proud to let others see how deeply she had been wounded. She put on a brave front; and her father gave her credit for stoicism, in no wise suspecting that the weight of her secret grief was almost intolerable.

Very little was said in the small household about this change in Naomi's fortunes. The cancelment of her engagement was accepted as an act of Joshua's. He had forbidden the marriage for some good reason of his own. No one dared ask him why—his wife

least of all. She could not have spoken Oswald's name to him. Her heart was full of fear, sorrow, and deepest pity for Naomi; yet she dared not offer her sympathy. There was a look in Naomi's face that forbade all approach — every offer of love. Cynthia felt that there was a gulf between them. Naomi tacitly avoided her. She was not unkind, but she shrank from all companionship with her father's wife; and henceforward Cynthia's life became very lonely. Her husband's hours were closely occupied, and spent for the most part away from her. Naomi lived her own life, as much as possible apart from her stepmother, and Judith was harsh and unfriendly. Jim was always Cynthia's friend and champion; but his busy career did not admit of much companionship. The small household met at meals, at the same hours, with the same regulations and ceremonies; but these family assemblies were silent and gloomy.

'Our dinner-time is getting uncommonly like a Quakers' meeting,' observed the audacious Jim at one of these dreary gatherings; 'I wish the spirit would move some of us to be lively.'

'When you've as much trouble on your mind as your father has you won't be quite so active with your tongue,' retorted aunt Judith.

The works at the Grange had undergone a sudden check. Oswald had written peremptory orders to his architect. The contract was to be carried out only so far as concerned the substantial repairs of the house. There was to be no rotunda, and the end of the drawing-room was to be walled up again.

'I am going abroad,' he wrote; 'make as good a job as you can of the place, and write to me at the subjoined address for cheques as you want them.'

The subjoined address was that of a London solicitor, a man who had done business for the old Squire occasionally.

The architect wondered and talked; and before many days everybody in Combhaven knew that Mr. Pentreath's engagement to Joshua Haggard's daughter was broken off. There was a great deal of talk, and much discussion and disputation about details, but a wonderful unanimity of opinion. The match would have been most unsuitable. Naomi Haggard was much too serious for a Squire's lady. The

Grange could never have held up its head properly under such a mistress, and a glass rotunda would have been absurdly out of keeping. 'He ought to marry Mr. Pinkley's only daughter,' said Combhaven, deciding for him offhand. 'There's only an accommodation road between Pinkley's land and his.'

The builders finished their work. The end of the long drawing-room was walled-up again, and there was no more talk of palms or fountains or an Italian garden. The Grange resumed its air of gloom and emptiness, and looked almost as dismal as in the lifetime of the old Squire.

So the summer ripened and grew more glorious, bringing no delight of heart to the minister's small household. The colours of the sea took a more vivid lustre from the fulness of the sun, like jewels in an Indian temple shining in the glare of many torches. There came over the land the sultry hush of the days before harvest. Very little doing in those rich fields, where the corn was gently stirred by the hot south wind, like the waves of a golden sea; very little doing in the big farmyards, where the cattle stood knee-deep in the tawny gorse-litter,

and contemplated the outer world listlessly, with dreamy brown eyes and a general air of benevolence: stillness and repose on all things. Cynthia Haggard looked at this lovely external universe languidly, with eyes that saw its beauty dimly, as in a dream in which one absorbing sense of overwhelming trouble makes all things faint and blurred. Her husband had spoken no unkind word to her since that scene with Oswald; yet she felt that he was estranged. He read more; he shut himself up in his own thoughts; gave himself up more completely to his contemplative and subjective religion, and that religion seemed to take a more gloomy and inexorable character. In his sermons he dwelt less on the divine love and charity, and harped on a harsher string—the doom of sinners destined to perdition; wretches on whom the divine light had never shone, for whom that all-saving faith which could lift the sinner out of the mire by one upward impulse of an awakened soul was a dead letter.

Cynthia shuddered as she listened. Was Oswald Pentreath one of these lost spirits?

She could see that her husband was unhappy,

yet had no power to comfort him. That weighed upon her heavily. She dared not complain to him of this disunion, lest she should be drawn into a confession of her sinful weakness, and constrained to admit her guilty love for the sinner. She could not have stood up before that righteous man and spoken falsely.

He never questioned her about Oswald Pentreath; yet she felt that there must be some strong suspicion of evil in his mind, and at the root of his arbitrary conduct in cancelling his daughter's engagement. It never occurred to her that Oswald's wild talk that afternoon had been overheard, and told to Joshua. She looked upon his knowledge rather as the result of some occult power of his own. His wisdom had penetrated the guilty secret.

One night, a little while after Naomi had given up her lover, Joshua came up to his bedchamber somewhat later than usual. He had stayed in the parlour after supper, writing or reading. Cynthia was lying awake, full of sad thoughts, vague forebodings of evil, aching pity for that weak sinner, wandering she knew not where. Joshua walked up

and down the room in silence for some minutes, and then stopped suddenly beside the bed, and looked down at the small face on the pillow, the sad blue eyes glancing up at him timidly, deprecating blame.

'I am glad you are not asleep,' he said. 'I want that book—the *Sorrows of Werther*. I have been thinking of what my sister said about it. I want to judge for myself. I looked at it too hurriedly the other day. I want to see what kind of book it was that made you unhappy.'

'You can't read it to-night, Joshua, surely? It's so late, and you must be tired.'

'I am tired, but not able to sleep. I would rather read than lie awake. My thoughts have been a burden to me of late. There was a time when my wakeful hours were full of sweetness, when I could lose myself in communion with my Redeemer. That time is past. Human trouble has made a wall between this poor clay and the spirit world.'

This was a reproach which smote the erring wife to the heart.

'Joshua, it is my fault,' she faltered; 'you were happier before you married me.'

'Happier!' he cried bitterly; 'I never knew the extremes of human joy or human pain till I knew you. Well, the pain has been immeasurable as the joy. If I erred, I have paid the penalty. Give me that book, Cynthia.'

Cynthia rose without another word, went to the drawer where she had hidden that fatal romance of real life, and brought the book to her husband with a meek obedience that moved him deeply. Even in his doubt and distrust of her—for he did doubt her, despite his brave words to Judith—there was an abiding love in his soul, a yearning to take her to his heart and forgive her and comfort her, and offer her deeper love than was ever given to woman—the wide strong love of a heart that had only awakened to passion in the maturity of its force and power. Could the love of youth, in all its glow of romance and poetry, be in anywise equal to this?

Cynthia put the book into his hand, and then remonstrated gently against the folly of midnight studies.

'Read it to-morrow, dear Joshua. You look tired and ill. Hark! it is striking eleven.'

'Go to bed and sleep,' he said sternly; 'I cannot. I want to read the book that melted you—and Oswald Pentreath. I wonder whether it will move me to tears.'

He set the candle on the old mahogany escritoire at which he wrote sometimes, and seated himself in the wide horsehair-covered armchair edged with brass nails, like an old-fashioned coffin. He opened the book with a resolute air, as a man who meant to plod through it, whatever stuff it might be. He read and read on with an intent face, turning leaf after leaf at measured intervals; Cynthia, lying with her face turned towards that gloomy figure, watching him as if he were reading in the book of doom. To her mind that book held the confession of Oswald's weakness and of hers. Joshua would know all when he had read that. Had it been an acknowledgment of sin written with her own hand, signed and attested, she could not have thought it more complete or final.

He read on deep into the night, Cynthia dozing

a little now and then, but for the most part watching him. The small hours struck, one after another, on the solemn old church bell; a faint chillness crept into the summer air; then slowly, softly, mysteriously, like a dream, came the gray dawn—first with a glimmer at the window; then with a broad cold light, that filled the room and made the flame of the candle pale and ghost-like; then with gleams of saffron and rose, and dim morning sunbeams like an infant's vague sweet smile. Still Joshua sat reading in the same fixed attitude; reading on with indomitable resolve, bent on knowing the utmost and the worst. For him, too, the book was a confession and a revelation. Werther was Oswald Pentreath; Charlotte was Cynthia: and they loved each other; their young hearts yearned to each other, overflowing with tenderest sympathies, with unspeakable affection; and fate, duty, religion, and honour stood between them, in the person of the unloved husband, separating them for ever.

The room was flooded with sunlight when he closed the book, with one long sigh. He could not refuse the sinner that one expression of pity, so lost,

so given over to an unconquerable passion, and yet with so much in him that was gentle and true and worthy.

Cynthia had fallen asleep at last. Joshua looked down at the pale face on the pillow, full of compassion, pitying her, pitying himself.

'Those two lived happily together, when Werther was gone,' he said to himself, thinking of Albert and Charlotte; 'but then Albert did not know that his wife's heart had gone from him.'

He washed and dressed himself, and went down to his daily round of labour, and said no word to Cynthia about the fatal book.

CHAPTER XIV.

'A STORM WAS COMING, BUT THE WINDS WERE STILL.'

No life could have been more self-contained than Naomi's in this fair summer time. She claimed sympathy from no one, but bore the anguish of her widowed heart in a resolute silence. From Cynthia she shrank, with a feeling that was more nearly akin to aversion than she would have liked to confess to herself. Womanly instinct had fathomed the mystery of Oswald's defection. She had looked back, and remembered, and weighed looks and tones of his, which had but faintly impressed her at the time, but which now, considered by the light of his subsequent conduct, had fullest significance. His heart had gone astray, and it was to Cynthia, her father's wife, that truant heart had wandered. Not with deliberate sinfulness; she could not believe him deliberately wicked. The tempter had set this snare for him, and he had weakly yielded. Cynthia's

childish beauty, Cynthia's innocently simple ways, had allured him from the straight path of righteous dealing. He had struggled, poor sinner, fought and striven with the Evil One, and, finding the powers of darkness too strong for him, had turned and fled. It was wisest, it was best so.

Naomi loved him with so fondly indulgent an affection—a passion so unselfish—that she could find it in her heart to forgive him for having fallen away from her. She could pardon and pity him, though he had taken the light and glory out of her life, and left her world empty as an exhausted crater. But she could not so easily forgive Cynthia. Her father's wife should have been above suspicion, unassailable by temptation. And if Cynthia had not shown some tokens of weakness, Oswald would surely have been stronger. Cynthia, the wandering waif, cherished and garnered by the most generous of men, should have loved her husband with a love strong enough to shield her from the possibility of temptation; and yet in this false wife's pallid face, in the heavy eyes, and sad set lips, Naomi read the secret of a guilty sorrow. She, Cynthia, grieved for

the absent one—she shared Naomi's sacred grief, she intruded upon that privileged domain of fond regret. The knowledge of this silent distress made Naomi angry and unforgiving.

One evening in the beginning of August, soon after Joshua's reading of *Werther*, Naomi walked alone in Pentreath Wood. Such lonely evening rambles were her melancholy comfort, and this wood her favourite resort. Her wild garden had been neglected of late. It was too narrow for her grief. Jim, or aunt Judith, or Cynthia might intrude upon her at any moment. But here, in this wide shadowy wood, she was really alone—no one to spy out her tears or offer humiliating pity; no companions but the stars high up yonder, shining through overarching beech and oak; the unknown life in brambles and underwood, dry fern and last year's leaves, which were stirred now and then mysteriously by those unfamiliar creatures that make merry at nightfall, or by the distant hoot of some ancient owl, sounding ghostlike in the dimness, or the red-brown cattle lying in the grassy hollows and sheltered corners, restful but unsleeping.

Here Naomi could nurse her grief as she pleased. She could bring forth her sorrow from its hiding-place, and cherish and caress it, as if it had been a fondly-loved child. Here she recalled Oswald's looks and tones, when she had believed him true, and lived over again the happy days in which he had been all her own—the time before Cynthia came and brought sorrow and shameful thoughts into Joshua Haggard's peaceful home. Every turn and wind of the dear old wood, every veteran oak, ferny bank, and knoll and hollow, was associated with that lost lover, and aided fancy to conjure up his image. Here he had read *Ivanhoe*, here *Marmion*. Here, in a lazy mood, he had lain stretched at full length, and told her the story of Caleb Williams, and how he had once seen Kean play the part of Sir Edward Mortimer, in the *Iron Chest*, at the little theatre in Exeter. Here, leaning against the silvery bark of this giant beech, he had recited Byron's 'Isles of Greece,' thrilled with a fervour which was almost inspiration. O, happy irredeemable hours—the dead departed delights of life!

Here, on this August evening, Naomi walked

and meditated. It was a dim and hazy twilight, with a pale new moon shining faintly behind the tree-tops. The young trees and the underwood beneath them had a ghostly look in this half light. It might have been a scene made up of shadows.

Bitter, beyond all measure of common bitterness, to remember the days—but a little while ago—when Naomi and her lover had roamed in this very wood, when there was but the red-brown glow of coming foliage on the beech-boughs, and the chestnut fans were still unfolded, and the anemones whitened the hollows, and the blue dog-violets smiled up at the blue April sky. Cynthia had been with them always—the fair young sick-nurse in her neat gray gown and little Quaker cap. She had been with them, sharing all their talk; and Naomi had nothing suspected, nothing doubted. It was only now that she understood the drama in which her own part had been so sad a one—only now that she could fathom the meaning of that low subdued voice, those pauses of silence, and lapses into dreamy thoughtfulness, which had marked Oswald's manner during this time.

'It was then he began to care for her,' she told herself. 'God help and pardon them both! I do not believe that either entered deliberately upon this path of sin. But if Cynthia saw that he was so weak, so wicked, she ought to have left the Grange at once; she ought never to have seen him again. It was her duty.'

Easy enough to say this, but a moment's reflection showed Naomi that it would have been no easy thing to do. To avoid temptation thus would have been to create a scandal. And Oswald had made no confession of his weakness. Those subtle differences in his tones and looks may have been meaningless for Cynthia.

'No,' thought Naomi, with a burst of very human passion, 'she must have understood them; his words and looks must have been clear to her, for she loves him.'

Pondering thus—as she had pondered on many an evening since her lover's desertion, travelling over and over again the same sad pathway of thought—Naomi came to the skirt of the wood, and from the wood into the park, where the trees stood far apart,

and the smooth sward rose and fell in gentle undulations. She could see the house from this point. How lonely it looked, how deserted; a gloomy dwelling that might have been so bright!

'I was to have been a fine lady, with a drawing-room and a conservatory,' Naomi said to herself, full of bitterness; 'and coaches were to come rolling over the gravel drive, where the weeds grow so thickly. And there were to be lights in all those windows; and music sounding in the night—a life like fairy-land. Poor Oswald! How he used to talk of our future! And he was true then—he meant all he said. O my dearest, my dearest,' she murmured, with clasped hands, 'I wanted no lights or music; I wanted no grand visitors—no bliss other than this common world can give, while I had you! My life would have been all happiness, had Providence made you the poorest of God's poor, and our home a hovel, and our days full of toil, if we had only spent them together—if you had only been true to me.'

She stopped, with tears rolling down her faded cheeks, tears that gushed forth unawares at the thought of what life might have been. She stood

looking straight before her with those tear-dimmed eyes, looking at the dull old house.

Not a gleam of light! Yes; the heavy hall-door opens slowly, and she sees the dim lamp within. A figure comes out of the dusky porch, and walks at a leisurely pace along the broad gravel terrace at the side of the house.

Naomi gave a faint awe-stricken cry, as if she had seen a ghost—a cry so faint that it could not reach the ears of yonder solitary dreamer pacing the gravel path with bent head. She turned, and hurried back to the wood, and was quickly lost in the darkness of that green mystery of oak and beech; and then, secure from observation, walked slowly home meditating, upon what she had seen.

He had come back; he who had said his path of life was to lie in other lands; he, the self-banished exile, the new Childe Harold. Why had he come? and was it for long? How was it that the village had not been aware of his coming, and made his return common talk—an inevitable consequence of such knowledge? Had he any purpose in returning secretly, in hiding himself from his little world?

Naomi was perplexed and troubled by these unanswerable questions.

It was late when she entered the little parlour at home. Prayers were over, and the family were seated in the usual formal array round the temperately furnished board. The huge junk of single Gloucester, about the size and shape of one of those granite slabs which bestrew the path of the adventurous tourist who tempts the perils of the Loggan Rock, stood up in the centre of the table like a household idol, round which the family had assembled for evening worship. The brown beer-jug—simulating a portly figure in a three-cornered hat—occupied its accustomed corner. Everything was precisely as Naomi remembered it in her earliest childhood. The quiet monotony of life had never been disturbed by new crockery, or a change of form and colour in the vulgar details of existence. The Druids could hardly have lived more simply than Joshua Haggard.

And now that the mainspring of life was broken, this sordid sameness seemed odious; nay, almost

unbearable. Naomi looked at the familiar home-picture with a shudder. Affection gave it no beauty in her eyes to-night. A fair enough picture of domestic peace from the outside, if there had been any one in the street to contemplate that candle-lit circle through the window; some vagabond, perchance, homeless, and deeming that there must be bliss in a home. Yet, save honest Jim, who sat munching his bread-and-cheese with a countenance of equable discontent, there was no member of that family circle whose bosom had not its load of care.

'Half-past nine, Naomi!' exclaimed Joshua, looking up reproachfully, as his daughter came into the room. 'The first time I've read prayers without you since I can remember, except when you've been ill. What has kept you so long?'

'I've been frightened,' answered Naomi, looking not at her father, but at Cynthia. 'I was in Pentreath Park, and I thought I saw a ghost.'

'A ghost, Naomi? I thought you were too good a Christian to believe in such folly.'

'Saul saw a ghost,' interjected Jim, with his

mouth full of lettuce, 'and you wouldn't say that was folly.'

'Saul lived in days when God taught His children by miracles.'

'And if Providence chose to send a ghost to Combhaven, who's to hinder it?' cried Jim, with unconscious irreverence. 'I'm sure ghosts are wanted—people are wicked enough. I daresay the Cock-lane ghost would have done a deal of good if a pack of busybodies hadn't made her out an impostor. And there are the ghosts that worried the Wesley family. You can't fly in *their* faces.'

'Sit down to your supper, Naomi,' said Joshua, rebuking Jim's flippancy by a grave disregard which was more crushing than remonstrance: 'you ought not to be wandering about so late of nights. It is not respectable.'

Naomi sighed and made no answer. Those weary ghosts in Dante's shadow world, wandering in their circles of despair, might have felt very much as she did, had any accuser charged them with levity or unseemly conduct. She looked at her father with eyes

full of a wondering reproachfulness, as if she would have said, 'Can you, who know my burden, upbraid me?'

'What about the ghost?' asked aunt Judith, sweeping her crumbs into a neat little heap with the back of her knife. 'Don't tell me it was Mr. Trimmer. Sally had the impudence to hint at his walking, only last Sunday night; but I think I stopped her tongue.'

Mr. Trimmer was a retired miller who had died of dropsy 'up street,' and who was supposed to be not quite comfortable in his mind concerning the division of the property which he had left behind him, about which there had been some squabbling among his nephews and nieces. This disagreement of the miller's heirs had given rise to the report of ghostly visitations of an erratic and unconsecutive character on the part of the miller.

'I won't swear to his having walked,' cried Jim eagerly; 'but there have been groans heard down at the old mill. *That* I can vouch for, because Joe Davis's father heard them when he was coming home from his work last Saturday night.'

'Why, Trimmer hadn't worked the mill for ten good years,' exclaimed aunt Judith. 'What could he want down there?'

'To look after the money he'd buried,' replied Jim, with conviction. 'You may depend that what he's left behind him above ground isn't half what he's left beneath.'

'Was it Trimmer?' asked Judith, letting her natural love of the marvellous get the better of common sense.

'No,' answered Naomi; 'it was nothing but fancy, I daresay. The mists were rising—white clouds of vapour that looked like the shadows of the dead.'

'Let there be no more said upon the subject,' said Joshua sternly. 'It is sinful to dwell upon such folly. Eat your supper, Naomi, and let there be none of these evening wanderings.'

It is not easy to eat when one is bidden. The home-made bread, sweet as it was, seemed bitter to Naomi's parched mouth. She drank a long draught of water and held her peace, and there was silence

till the end of the meal. Naomi lifted her downcast eyelids once or twice, and looked at Cynthia with thoughtful scrutiny. There was nothing in the young wife's countenance to betray any knowledge of Oswald's return to the Grange. There was only that settled sadness which had become a part of the sweet face lately.

'She will know very soon, I daresay,' thought Naomi bitterly. 'It is not to see me that he has come back.'

Her heart burned with indignation, as if Cynthia had, by some unholy witchcraft, some subtle silent exercise of womanly artifice, lured the false lover back to her net. She could not give her credit for innocence, or even for unconscious yielding to a guilty love. No, it was Cynthia's fault that Oswald had gone astray. Had she been strong in purity of heart, Oswald would never have been so weak.

When the time came for bidding good-night, and Cynthia approached with her pretty pleading look and rosebud mouth ready to kiss, Naomi turned away from her stepmother with a stony face, and left

the room in silence. Cynthia looked after her wonderingly, but said not a word. She knew but too well what it meant. Oswald's treachery had made a lasting breach between them. Her only hope was that Joshua had not seen that cruel repulse. But he had seen it, and formed his own conclusions thereupon.

END OF VOL. II.

LONDON:
ROBSON AND SONS, PRINTERS, PANCRAS ROAD, N.W.